



**IRSE**  
INSTITUTION OF  
RAILWAY SIGNAL  
ENGINEERS

# GUIDANCE ON THE APPLICATION OF THE IRSE LICENSING SCHEME

July 2015



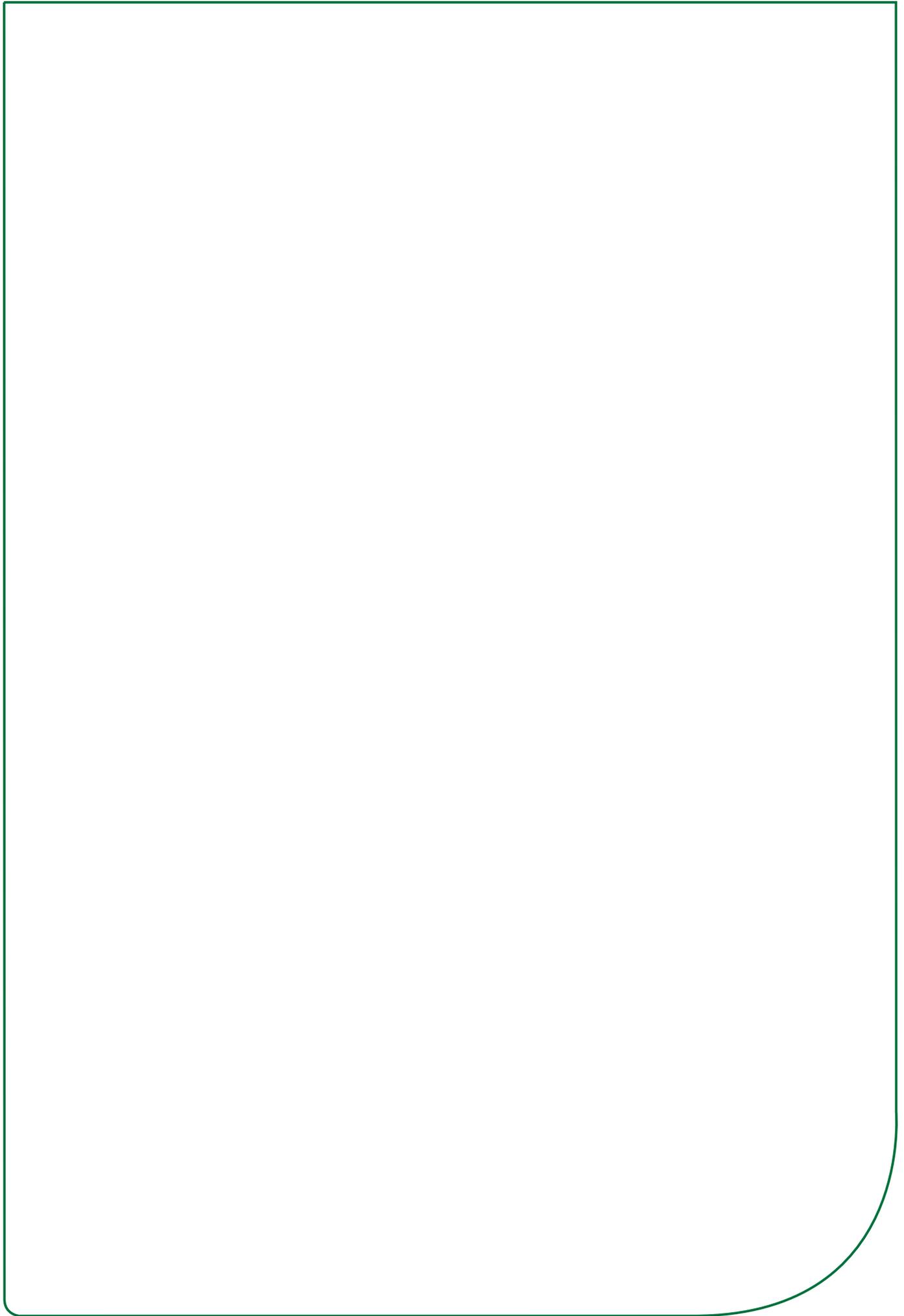




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**Note:** This Guidance Note does not define the process for obtaining a licence, nor any of the other activities associated with the operation of the Licensing Scheme. These are covered by the procedures on the Licensing website ([www.irselicensing.org](http://www.irselicensing.org)), with which employees and employers that use the Scheme are expected to comply.



# 1 About the Licensing Scheme

- 1.1. The IRSE Licensing Scheme was introduced in 1994 and provides a means of competence certification for personnel undertaking work in the railway signalling and telecommunications industry. An IRSE licence may be issued to any person who can satisfy the requirements laid down in the Licensing Scheme competence standards. A licence holder does not have to be a member of the IRSE.
- 1.2. Each licence describes the scope of competence of the licence holder, that scope being a subset of a suite of licence categories defined within the Scheme. The licence categories represent “roles” undertaken by signalling and telecommunications engineers, covering design, installation, testing, maintenance and engineering management.
- 1.3. Applicants for a licence have to demonstrate that they have the knowledge, skills and experience required for the competent performance of work for each licence category sought. The means of demonstrating competence is by assessment against the competence criteria for each requested licence category. Licence applicants must be regularly employed on licensable work, and are required to ensure that their work experience and training remain current after the issue of a licence. Licence holders are required to maintain evidence of this in their logbook.
- 1.4. Assessment of an applicant for a licence is a two-stage process; firstly there is a workplace assessment, followed by an independent assessment by a Competence Assessor registered with the IRSE. Licences are valid for five years, after which the holder has to go through a “surveillance” process. Subject to a satisfactory surveillance, the licence validity can be extended for a further 5 years (at the end of which a renewal process must be undertaken). A licence ceases to be valid if satisfactory surveillance has not been completed by the 5 year point.
- 1.5. The licence is recognition of the individual’s competence as demonstrated in the workplace and/or by a portfolio of evidence. The standards achieved in gaining the licence are recognised by rail industry employers across the UK and in some other countries as well. The licence and supporting records in the licence holder’s logbook are “portable” between employers. The licence belongs to the employee, not the company for whom he or she works.
- 1.6. The licensing scheme is governed by the IRSE Licensing Committee, in accordance with a suite of procedures. The Licensing Scheme is accredited by UKAS to BS EN ISO/IEC17024 (Conformity Assessment. General Requirements for Bodies Operating Certification of Persons). Accreditation by UKAS demonstrates the competence, impartiality and performance capability of the IRSE and indicates Government recognition of the scheme.

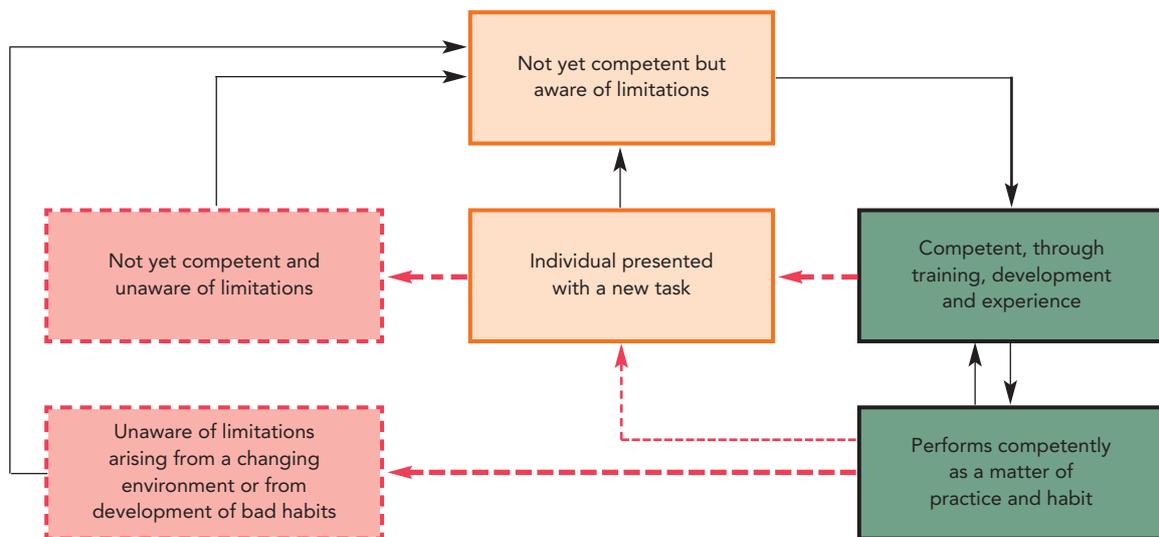
<sup>1</sup> The IRSE Licence is not valid for use in North America, or for contracts that are subject to North American legislation. See IRSE Licence Procedure LP1 (Licence Holders) for further details.

- 1.7. The Licensing Scheme is not a complete Competence Management System (CMS), nor does it aim to be so. This Guidance Note is intended to help companies and individuals to understand how the Licensing Scheme can form a part of a CMS, and help to provide practical advice on specific topics such as:
- Gaining work experience under mentorship;
  - Circumstances under which possession of an IRSE Licence should be regarded as the norm;
  - Authority to Work arrangements for equipment-specific competences

## 2 What is a Competence Management System?

- 2.1. A complete description of a Competence Management System is beyond the scope of this Guidance Note. It is useful, however, to understand what a CMS is intended to do, both for individuals and for the organisations within which they work. Competence management is relevant to all of an organisation's activities, but in the context of this Guidance Note we are focussing particularly on safety-related activities, including specifically work related to railway signalling and telecommunications systems.
- 2.2. For an organisation, the purpose of operating a CMS can be summarised as being to enable and ensure that employees, contractors and suppliers fulfil their responsibilities and perform to recognised standards of competence so that the organisation:
  - manages risks effectively (particularly safety risks, both to employees and others affected by the organisation's activities)
  - satisfies legal and regulatory requirements
  - meets its business objectives and contractual obligations
- 2.3. For the individual employee, the CMS aims to ensure that an organisation's employees:
  - understand the responsibilities associated with their roles in the organisation
  - understand the performance standards to which they are expected to work
  - receive appropriate training and development
  - possess the relevant knowledge and experience for their responsibilities and activities
  - are assessed to verify that they are competent and fit for their roles
- 2.4. Finally, it should be noted that competence management is more than just equipping an individual with the skills to perform a task. It is also about ensuring that:
  - they have the aptitude and attitude appropriate for the role
  - they understand and work within the limits of their competence and authority
  - their ability to perform competently in their role is maintained over time, to address both natural deterioration in competence and changes in competence requirements
- 2.5. A company's CMS is not simply about ensuring that its employees are individually competent. It is also to do with:
  - Ensuring the collective competence of the company to undertake its work
  - Being assured that other entities (such as contractors) that supply services and products to the company also have in place suitable competence management systems

2.6. A diagram produced by the UK's Health and Safety Executive in a publication on competence, (reproduced below) illustrates the various "states" of competence in which an individual may be. The green boxes represent states where the individual is working fully competently. The yellow boxes are the states where the individual is not yet fully competent but the situation is being managed (eg by supervision). The red boxes are the unsafe states where an individual is working without the appropriate competence or other safeguards, and is unaware that they are not, or are no longer, competent. The arrowed lines indicate the routes by which an individual moves between these various states.



KEY:   
- - - Natural deterioration   
— Effective competence management

### 3 What elements of a CMS does the IRSE Licensing Scheme provide?

3.1. The Health and Safety Executive publication referred to above describes fifteen principles that characterise an effective CMS. The IRSE Licensing Scheme has various features which, to varying degrees, support compliance with ten of the principles, as described below. The remaining five principles, where the Scheme makes little or no contribution towards compliance, are listed in paragraph 3.3.

- a) **Establishing competence criteria/standards:** The Scheme provides competence standards and checklists for most of the generic roles that people engaged in railway signalling and engineering may be required to perform, covering design, installation, testing, maintenance, technical investigation, and engineering management. Within each of these groupings various roles exist (known as licence categories) and for each one there is a competence assessment standard and checklist.  
*[HSE Principle 2]*
- b) **Defining processes and methods.** The Scheme has a number of procedures that define all the responsibilities and processes associated with the operation of the Scheme. These are written so as to ensure the efficient and effective operation of the Scheme, as well as meeting the requirements of BS EN ISO/IEC17024. They are available on the IRSE Licensing website.  
*[HSE Principle 3]*
- c) **Assessing competence:** The Scheme defines a process by which a candidate seeking to obtain a licence is initially assessed for his/her competence, using one or more of the standards and checklists as appropriate to their role. The assessment criteria are generic in nature, focussed on more on the processes associated with the role rather than assessing the candidate's equipment-specific knowledge. The assessment is a two-stage process which involves observing the candidate undertaking work, assessing their knowledge as relevant to the role, verifying their work record and relevant supporting evidence, and interviewing them on their understanding of the requirements of the role. Records are kept of the assessment activities and findings. Following successful completion of the assessment process, the IRSE issues a licence for the relevant category (or categories) of work. Licences have an expiry date beyond which they are no longer valid. The Scheme defines a process by which a licence can be renewed when it expires, similar to that for the original issue of the licence.  
*[HSE Principle 5]*

2 UK Health and Safety Executive guidance: "Managing competence for safety-related systems" (2007)

- d) **Developing competence:** The Scheme does not include formal requirements for developing the competence of personnel for future roles or enhanced capability in their existing role. However, there is an expectation that licenced managers, supervisors and team-leaders would, during the course of their work, be involved in developing the skills and capabilities of those who work for them. *[HSE Principle 6]*
- e) **Assigning responsibilities:** The competence criteria in licence categories for managerial and team leader roles include requirements on a licence holder to make sure that others to whom he or she assigns work are competent and equipped to undertake that work. *[HSE Principle 7]*
- f) **Monitoring competence:** The Scheme defines processes by which licence holders are subject to periodic surveillance checks to ensure that, during the period of validity of their licence, they remain competent. *[HSE Principle 8]*
- g) **Dealing with failures to perform competently:** The Scheme has a formal Complaints and Appeals Procedure whereby anyone can register a complaint about the workmanship or conduct of a licence holder in respect of their licensable work. The procedure provides for adjudication of complaints, and the revocation of an individual's licence or suspension until he/she has undertaken agreed actions to restore competence. *[HSE Principle 9]*
- h) **Managing competence of assessors:** The Scheme sets standards for people who undertake the assessment of candidates, and for the organisations that are appointed as part of the Scheme and which employ the assessors (known as "Assessing Agents"). Assessing Agent organisations are subject to regular audit and checks by auditors appointed by the IRSE Licensing Committee, to ensure that they continue to work to the standards required. *[HSE Principle 10]*
- i) **Managing information:** The Scheme requires the production and keeping of records of competence assessments by assessors and by the IRSE itself. It also requires licence holders to maintain a record of their licensable work in a logbook in order to provide evidence that they are carrying out work within the scope of their licence. The logbook entries are subject to verification by a supervisor or manager to confirm that the work has been performed satisfactorily. *[HSE Principle 12]*
- j) **Managing change.** The competence criteria/standards referred to in (a) above are subject to a five yearly review by the IRSE Licensing Committee to check for continued fitness for purpose, and to take account of changes in industry requirements. *[HSE Principle 13]*

- k) **Auditing.** The Scheme is subject to both internal and external audit (the latter by UKAS) to give confidence that it is being operated correctly and meeting its objectives. *[HSE Principle 14]*
- l) **Reviewing.** The Scheme is subject to periodic review to ensure continuing fitness for purpose. A sub-committee of the IRSE Licensing Committee meets twice yearly for this purpose, and the Scheme has its own improvement plan to drive improvements where appropriate, managed by the IRSE Licensing Committee. *[HSE Principle 15]*
- 3.2. Although these features of the Licensing Scheme contribute significantly towards meeting ten of the HSE principles, they do not do so sufficiently for the purposes of a fully effective CMS, and therefore they need to be supplemented by additional arrangements, responsibility for which generally rests with the employer.
- 3.3. The Licensing Scheme does not provide any arrangements to meet the remaining five principles in the HSE publication, namely:
- **Defining and purpose and scope of the CMS** (which may be considerably broader than the scope of the Licensing Scheme). *[HSE Principle 1]*
  - **Selecting and recruiting staff.** *[HSE Principle 4]*
  - **Managing supplier competence.** *[HSE Principle 11]*

## 4 Who should possess a licence?

- 4.1. People have to possess an IRSE licence for their work if:
- a) their work falls within the scope of one or more licence categories
- AND
- b) EITHER their employer requires them to be licensed, OR it is a condition of their employer's contracts with their clients that they are licensed (or, in the case of a self-employed person, their contracts require them to be licensed).

Note that the Licensing Scheme itself does not mandate the possession of a licence in order to undertake licensable work, although the IRSE does of course recommend it as good practice.

- 4.2. Even where an employer or a client organisation normally requires an employee to possess a licence covering the categories of work they are undertaking, there may be circumstances under which the employee is not licensed, such as:
- a) Where the employee is undertaking work experience for the purposes of obtaining a licence or an additional licence category, and their work is being overseen to ensure that no safety risk arises. The person overseeing their work normally takes responsibility for the quality and safety of the work in these circumstances. This subject is addressed later in this guidance document.
  - b) Where the employee is undertaking work in a licensable category and for which they have received training and have been deemed competent, but it is not their principal or substantive role. This is commonly known as a "secondary activity" – see below.

- 4.3. The concept of primary and secondary activities is not recognised within the Licensing Scheme procedures, but it is one that is used by employers in some circumstances and is therefore addressed in this guidance. The terms are defined as follows:

**Primary activity:** The area(s) of activity that the employee is expected to fulfil as part of the normal course of their job (usually described in their job or role description).

**Secondary activity:** An area of activity in which the employee may be called to work occasionally and which do not form part of the employee's normal work.

- 4.4. Employees who need to be licensed under the conditions set out in paragraph 4.1 should possess a licence covering the licence category or categories that are relevant to their primary activities. The IRSE provides an online mechanism for checking the validity of a licence, which may be useful if there is any reason to doubt that an individual holds a valid licence for work that he or she is to be assigned.

- 4.5. The IRSE recommends that wherever practicable, employees should acquire a licence with categories that cover their secondary activities as well as their primary activities. Where an employer chooses not to licence an employee for a secondary activity, for whatever reason, they must be aware that:
- a) The responsibility for that decision rests with the employer;
  - b) The alternative arrangements for ensuring that employees are competent for secondary activities must form part of the company's CMS, in accordance with the HSE principles referred to in section 3;
  - c) The risks associated with an employee undertaking an activity infrequently can be greater than where he or she is regularly exercising their skills, and the arrangements in the CMS should take account of this;
  - d) The extent to which the employee is working on the secondary activity must be monitored to ensure that it is not becoming a significant part of their job (if it is, then they will need to be licensed).
- 4.6. Typically, people undertaking secondary activities without a licence fall into one of three categories:
- a) They may be undertaking licensable work that they have been deemed competent to perform and which does not carry a high level of personal responsibility (for instance because the work is checked by someone else who is appropriately licensed);
  - b) They may be highly experienced individuals who have moved on in their career but previously undertook licensable work as one of their primary activities and are considered still to possess the skills and knowledge to do that work;
  - c) They may hold a licence for their primary role and by using the transferable skills and underpinning knowledge from this licence are able to undertake a secondary activity for which they have been assessed as competent.
- 4.7. If an employee is being considered for a secondary activity, they would be expected to undergo assessment to verify that they are competent in accordance with relevant occupational standards, incorporating checks to ensure that:
- They have received appropriate training and work experience;
  - They possess the appropriate knowledge for the role;
  - They have the aptitude and attitude appropriate for the role;
  - They understand the limits of their competence and authority.

- 4.8. The assessment of the individual's competence for the secondary activity should be performed by a person who is also competent for that activity (as exemplified by holding a licence for the work), and who has been authorised to carry out the assessment in accordance with the company's procedures. Records of the assessments and approvals should be kept. Individuals should be periodically re-assessed at a frequency based on the relevant occupational standards as well as factors applicable to the individual.
- 4.9. As with primary activities, it is important that the individual can demonstrate that they retain their competence for their secondary activity in the interval between assessments. This can be done by use of a log book or other recording means to show the occasions when the secondary activity was undertaken, and also to record how they have kept up to date with changes to requirements for the secondary activity. This is of particular importance in helping to ensure that there is no skill decay arising from the fact that the secondary activity is carried out infrequently.

## 5 Responsibilities of employers in enabling employees to acquire a licence

- 5.1. Employers and managers should encourage personnel engaged in the licensable categories of work to obtain an IRSE licence, and should facilitate this by:
- Providing training and work experience that will enable personnel to acquire the knowledge and skills required
  - Providing logbooks that meet the requirements of the Licensing Scheme, and encouraging and assisting personnel to complete and maintain those log books
  - Providing facilities for assessments to be carried out
  - Supporting personnel in their application to the IRSE to obtain their licences
- 5.2. These responsibilities are also addressed in of Licensing Procedure LP05 (Employers' Code of Practice).

## 6 Training, training provision, and the standardisation of training

- 6.1. The Licensing Scheme is a means of assessing and managing competence, and the IRSE does not specify the means by which the knowledge, skills and experience applicable to a particular licence category can be acquired.
- 6.2. It is the responsibility of employers and employees to ensure that they undertake such training as may be appropriate to facilitate the acquisition of a licence, making use of reputable training providers. The IRSE does not recommend particular training courses or training providers as being suitable for making progress towards the acquisition of a licence. Within the UK, the National Skills Academy for Rail Engineering (NSARE) is progressively undertaking the certification of training providers, trainers and training courses, and this may be of assistance to companies wanting to send people for training.
- 6.3. Historically, a number standardised S&T training courses and syllabuses have been developed and used in Great Britain, particularly for signalling testers although not exclusively so. However, there is currently little formal control to ensure that the content of ostensibly identical courses remains standardised across different training providers. With the passage of time, the content of courses which, for instance, have the same title, have diverged somewhat. Users of these courses should therefore check that the course content matches their expectations and needs, rather than relying purely on a course title and synopsis as a guarantee that the content is appropriate and the same irrespective of which training provider is offering it.

## 7 Gaining work experience under mentorship

**IMPORTANT:** Throughout this document the word “mentor” is used in a specific sense for the purposes of the IRSE Licensing Scheme, as described in this section. The nature of mentoring for Licensing is not the same as that generally encountered within Professional Development schemes (including the IRSE’s own Mentoring Scheme), where the term refers to a broader role associated with guiding and advising people in their professional development. In the context of IRSE Licensing, some employers use alternative terms to mentoring, such as “Responsible Competent Person”.

- 7.1. One of the requirements for obtaining a licence is that the individual has to demonstrate their competence by undertaking work that is within the scope of the licence category they are seeking. Arrangements need to exist, therefore, whereby he or she can gain experience whilst not licensed, without undue risk to themselves, others or the operating railway. In order to do this they will need to undertake work activities under mentorship. These mentoring arrangements should form part of the company’s CMS.
- 7.2. Mentoring in this context is the work of advising and supervising the unlicensed person (the mentee) to ensure that he/she understands both the process and technical requirements required in order for him/her to complete a given task to an acceptable standard in order to be sure that:
  - the activity is undertaken correctly, in accordance with instructions and procedures;
  - the results of the activity are safe and satisfactory;
  - the person being mentored is behaving correctly (and in particular, safely).Mentoring may also involve directing the unlicensed person’s work, for instance to instruct the individual regarding the right way of doing something, or to correct errors. The need for this will of course depend upon the prior knowledge and experience of the individual being mentored.
- 7.3. As the unlicensed person demonstrably gains the skills they need, through work experience and by formal/informal training, the requirement for direct and immediate observation of every task or activity may become less. The mentor can see the individual is capable of working correctly and safely, and close supervision of the work as it is undertaken can be confined to the more difficult activities and those with which the individual is not yet familiar. Managing this transition towards competence requires judgement by the mentor – there is no prescriptive formula, and the rate of progress will depend greatly upon the capability of the individual being mentored and the nature of the work they are undertaking.

- 7.4. Most importantly however, until the individual is deemed fully competent for an activity or role (signified usually by the issuing of a licence by the IRSE for the applicable category of work), the mentor or another responsible competent person (appointed for the purpose) should always confirm that the work has been performed correctly. This should be done before the work is "used" (for instance, in the case of maintenance work, before the equipment is returned to service; or in the case of design work, before the design is used for installation purposes; or in the case of new works testing, before the tested equipment enters service).
- 7.5. In some cases confirmation that the work has been completed satisfactorily can be given by inspecting or checking the results and documentation of the work, or by hearing an account from the unlicensed person as to how they carried out the work. However, in other circumstances confirmation can be given only if the unlicensed person has actually been observed carrying out the work. It is the responsibility of the person who is signing for the work to determine what checks are necessary.
- 7.6. Having confirmed that the work was undertaken and completed satisfactorily, the mentor or other responsible competent person should sign the work record or other documentation (as required by the relevant company procedures) to this effect. This may include a record of any checks they undertook because the person who performed the work was unlicensed. By signing the work record or other documentation they are taking responsibility for the completeness and safety of the work as though it was their own.
- 7.7. The unlicensed person undertaking the work should record their activities in their IRSE Logbook, and get the mentor to countersign the record, together with any relevant comments. Further information about the use of the Logbook is given later in this Guidance Note.

The mentor should possess an IRSE licence relevant to the category of work being undertaken by the unlicensed person. For instance, a licensed signalling principles designer might mentor someone who is working towards obtaining their signalling designer licence. Whoever undertakes the mentorship of the unlicensed person, it is important that he or she is competent to do so, including possession of:

- requisite technical knowledge and experience as to how the work should be done
  - non-technical skills , including aptitude appropriate for mentoring
- 7.8. A mentee may have more than one mentor, depending upon the range of task(s) he or she is undertaking. A record should be kept of who is mentoring whom for what tasks, and the scope of work for which mentoring is being provided, in order that both mentor and mentee are able to plan accordingly. The mentor does not have to be in a managerial or supervisory role, but they should be judged suitable to undertake the role of mentor by a manager or supervisor.

## 8 Authority to Work

- 8.1. Possession of an IRSE licence for a specific category of work indicates that an individual is generically competent for the type of work defined by the scope of that category (each licence category competence standard has a defined scope). However, it does not mean that the licence holder can work on all types of equipment within that scope.
- 8.2. Thus, for instance, someone who designs relay-based signalling systems should hold a signalling design licence, but possession of the licence does not necessarily mean that they can also design (or be required to design) mechanical interlocking systems, or perform data preparation for computer-based interlocking systems.
- 8.3. Therefore all employers are expected to have a system in place for assessing and recording the technology-specific skills that each licensed employee possesses, and for ensuring that licensable work activities are allocated only to those individuals who possess both the appropriate licence category and the applicable technology-specific skills.
- 8.4. The record of an individual's technology-specific skills is generally known as the "Authority to Work" or Certificate of Competence, and takes the form of a documented or electronic certificate or permit which states what equipment or tasks the individual is competent to work on, the basis for that authorisation, and who has given the authority. A current copy of the Authority to Work certificate/permit should be kept in the licence holder's log book.
- 8.5. In the example of the signalling designer referred to above, the significance of the licence-holder's authority to work is emphasised in the scope statement for that licence category with the following words: "The licence is valid for the systems that a designer is authorised to work on which are defined on their Authority to Work".
- 8.6. If a licensed person has been assessed as competent to undertake secondary activities for which they are not licensed (see section 4), then the Authority to Work should record the specific secondary activities for which they are authorised.
- 8.7. The IRSE does not specify the procedures for determining the equipment-specific competences that an individual possesses and issuing the Authority to Work certificates/permits, nor for ensuring that employees are allocated work activities for they are competent. These arrangements should be documented and implemented by employers. This also applies to "labour only" employers of signalling personnel, where responsibility lies with supplier of the personnel, not the organisation to which the personnel are contracted.

## 9 Periodic review of competence by employers

- 9.1. The licence holder's employer is required to perform an annual review to confirm that the licence holder continues to be engaged on work within the scope of their licence, and that the work is being performed competently.
- 9.2. The periodic review should include an examination of the licence holder's log book to check that the records of work experience and other information is accurate and up to date. The reviewer (usually, but not always, the individual's line manager or supervisor) should annotate the entries to indicate that the check has been made, and should record their name, job title and relationship to the licence holder. The logbook entries are subject to scrutiny by the Competence Assessor as part of the surveillance process described in section 1.
- 9.3. If the employer finds that the licence holder has not maintained the necessary competencies for any of the categories of work included on the licence, the Licensing Registrar should be informed as soon as possible.
- 9.4. These responsibilities are also addressed in of Licensing Procedure LP05 (Employers' Code of Practice).

## 10 Responsibilities of licence holders

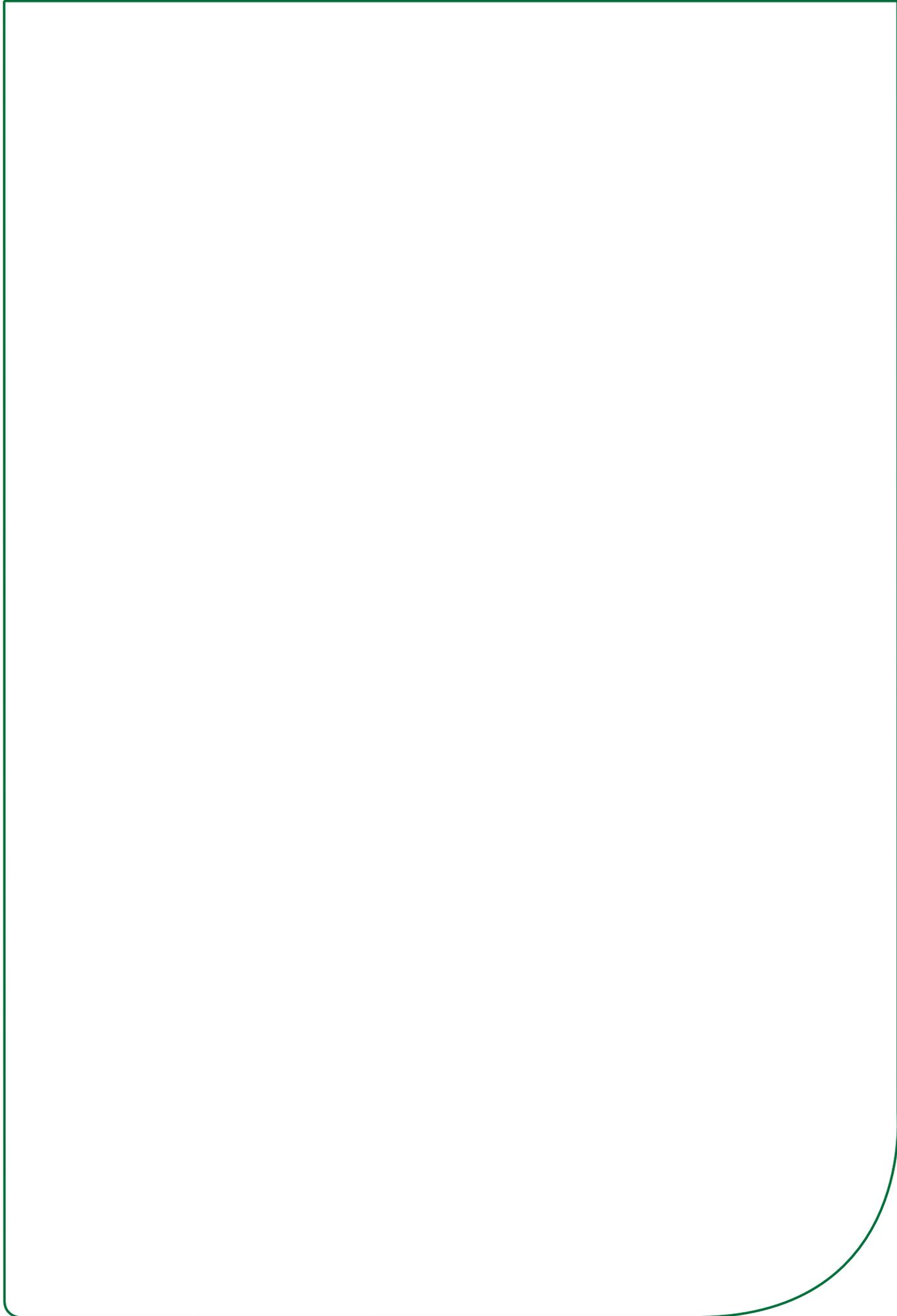
10.1. Licence holders have obligations placed upon them in respect of various matters set out in the document "Obligations of Licence Holders and Log Book Requirements", which can be found on the IRSE Licensing website. These include:

- Safety
- Personal conduct
- Correct use of their licensing logbook
- Maintenance of their competence by being regularly employed on licensable work
- Not undertaking work for which they do not consider themselves competent to carry out
- Ensuring the continuing validity of their licence

These obligations are not repeated here, but licence holders and their employees should familiarise themselves with the requirements as set out in the document referred to above. It is a condition of possessing a licence that the licence holder complies with the requirements, and failure to do so could result in the withdrawal of the licence by the IRSE.

### References

1. UK Health and Safety Executive guidance: "Managing competence for safety-related systems" (2007):  
<http://www.hse.gov.uk/humanfactors/topics/mancomppt1.pdf>
2. UK Office of Rail Regulation guidance: "Developing and maintaining staff competence" (2007):  
[http://orr.gov.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0016/4264/sf-dev-staff.pdf](http://orr.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0016/4264/sf-dev-staff.pdf)







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