

## **The Role and Purpose of the EASA Management System Assessment Tool (MSAT) – 2023 Edition**

Sofema Aviation Services (SAS) Considers the key features of the MSAT Process

### **Introduction**

The EASA Management System Assessment Tool (MSAT) supports Competent Authorities to oversee organisations not just for compliance, but for capability, maturity, and resilience.

- Its role is to promote consistent, data-informed, risk-aware oversight while also driving a culture of continuous improvement and accountability within regulated organisations. In doing so, MSAT directly supports the evolution of aviation oversight in Europe toward a fully performance-based and integrated safety oversight framework.

The Management System Assessment Tool (MSAT) serves as an enabler of performance-based oversight (PBO) and effective safety assurance across multiple aviation domains.

- Its central role lies in empowering competent authorities to assess the following
  - The compliance of an organisation's management system
  - Management System Maturity,
  - Management System Effectiveness,
  - Capacity to proactively manage safety risk.

### **Purpose of MSAT in the Oversight Framework**

The MSAT, first developed under the direction of EASA's Regulatory Advisory Group and updated in 2023, is designed to address a specific need to support effective oversight:

Enables evaluation of how well an organisation's management system is functioning in practice, particularly in terms of delivering on its safety objectives.

Key functions of the tool include:

- Support to Competent Authorities in assessing management systems during:
  - Initial certification;
  - Continuing oversight;
  - Evaluation of safety performance in performance-based oversight contexts.

- Support to Organisations as a self-assessment tool, either for internal continuous improvement or to evaluate subcontracted entities with independent management systems.

**Deliverables** - By enabling a structured & flexible review, the MSAT

- Enhances oversight standardisation,
- Encourages collaboration between oversight teams, and
- Fosters shared understanding between authorities and certificate holders regarding system performance expectations.

### Summary of Expectations

To effectively deliver modern, performance-based oversight, competent authorities should go beyond compliance checking.

- To understand the difference between process and outcome,
- Apply informed judgement to assess how well systems are functioning, and
- Engage with organisations in a way that fosters safety improvement.

These capabilities require training as well as a shift in oversight culture—from regulatory enforcer to strategic safety partner.

### MSAT as a Performance-Oriented Assessment Framework

Unlike traditional checklist-driven approaches focused on prescriptive compliance, the MSAT embodies a maturity model, using four levels of assessment:

- **Present** – the required process or element exists;
- **Suitable** – it is appropriate to the size, complexity, and risk profile of the organisation;
- **Operating** – it is implemented and producing outputs;
- **Effective** – it is achieving the intended safety outcomes and contributing to continuous improvement.

MSAT supports performance-based safety evaluation, where the focus is not merely on whether requirements are followed, but whether they work effectively within the operational context to:

- Identify hazards;
- Assess and mitigate risks;

- Monitor safety performance;
- Respond to emerging risks and change;
- Demonstrate an active safety management system embedded in the operational culture.

### **Strategic Value for Performance-Based Oversight (PBO)**

A core objective of the MSAT is to provide reliable input into the risk-based oversight planning cycle. The assessment results directly influence:

- The extent and frequency of oversight;
- Potential extensions of oversight planning cycles for mature organisations;
- The focus areas of future audits and evaluations.

This aligns with EASA Regulator principles that allow adjustments to oversight effort based on demonstrated safety performance and effective risk management by the organisation.

**Note** - Being compliant is not the same as being safe. The MSAT process is intended to differentiate between organisations that tick regulatory boxes and those that proactively drive safety through operational excellence and safety culture.

### **Continuous Improvement and Harmonisation**

Another fundamental purpose of MSAT is to encourage:

- Continuous improvement of SMS practices, moving beyond baseline expectations toward organisational excellence;
- Harmonisation of safety management assessment across aviation domains (e.g. Part-145, Part-CAMO, Part-21, Air Ops), ensuring a common assessment methodology regardless of the type of organisation;
- The integration of safety management at the State and organisation level, in alignment with ICAO Annex 19 and Doc 9859, supporting a whole-of-system approach to safety oversight.

MSAT supports both vertical integration (State–organisation) and horizontal consistency (across domains and authorities), providing the groundwork for mutual recognition and streamlined oversight collaboration.

### **Training and Competency in Using MSAT**

The effective application of MSAT requires that competent authority assessors are trained not just in using the tool, but in:

- Understanding the difference between compliance-based and performance-based oversight;

***Understanding the Difference Between Compliance-Based and Performance-Based Oversight***

*Compliance-based oversight (CBO) involves verifying adherence to documented procedures, technical standards, and regulatory requirements using checklists and formal audits. The emphasis is on whether something is done, not necessarily how well or how effectively it is done.*

*Performance-based oversight (PBO) evaluates the organisation's ability to achieve safety objectives through effective management of risks and continuous improvement.*

- *The focus shifts from documentation and formalities to actual outcomes—such as safety performance indicators, data-driven decision-making, and proactive safety culture.*

***Asking Relevant Questions***

- *How do organisations measure their own safety performance?*
- *How organisations manage change, and*
- *How they respond to safety data.*

***Note*** - *Assessors should look beyond compliance and consider whether the system is actually functioning as intended. Authorities should provide additional focus on evaluating operational effectiveness.*

- Applying judgement to evaluate effectiveness, not just presence or suitability;

***Applying Judgement to Evaluate Effectiveness, Not Just Presence or Suitability***

In a management system context, the term "presence" refers to whether a policy or process exists. "Suitability" means that the process is appropriate to the organisation's size, complexity, and operational scope. However, a truly mature oversight system also asks whether the process is "operating" and—most importantly—whether it is "effective."

Effectiveness means the process is not just implemented, rather it is delivering the expected safety outcomes. This requires inspectors to apply professional judgement, weighing evidence gathered from interviews, observations, performance data, and operational results.

To support this level of assessment, competent authorities should provide scenario-based training to help inspectors build confidence in applying judgement.

- The oversight team should use structured evaluation models to bring consistency across different inspectors.

- Peer calibration exercises—where multiple inspectors review the same case and compare outcomes—can further improve consistency.
- Important Note - Every judgement made about effectiveness should be supported by clear justification, rooted in evidence rather than opinion.

- Facilitating engagement with organisations in a constructive, improvement-focused manner.

## Engagement Expectations

Fully implementing MSAT demands a shift in mindset—toward partnership in safety performance rather than traditional regulatory enforcement.

### **Facilitating Engagement with Organisations in a Constructive, Improvement-Focused Manner**

Constructive engagement means that the oversight relationship between the competent authority and the organisation is built on dialogue, trust, and shared commitment to safety—not just enforcement.

Oversight should encourage the organisation to identify its own areas for improvement, promote learning from past experiences, and proactively adapt to emerging risks.

This approach moves beyond punitive auditing to become a partnership in safety. Inspectors should provide feedback that includes observations—not just findings—to support continuous improvement.

They should be capable of having open, non-confrontational discussions about safety performance and organisational challenges.

Effective engagement means recognising good practice when it's observed and encouraging organisations to share lessons and innovations.

To support this objective, competent authorities need to ensure that their staff are trained not only in technical skills, but also in interpersonal communication, coaching, and facilitation.

Oversight debriefings should be used as opportunities to reflect collaboratively on both strengths and weaknesses.

Authorities may also foster ongoing relationships through regular safety promotion forums, industry dialogue, and informal engagement outside of formal audits.

## Next Steps

Sofema Aviation Services (SAS) provides the following training as Classroom or Webinar - Using The EASA Management System Assessment Tool (EASA MSAT) – 2 Days

<https://sassofia.com/course/using-the-easa-management-system-assessment-tool-easa-msat-2-days/>