

Improving the way we manage modifications involving System file formats - Paper for the iGT UNC March Workstream

Background and description of the problem

Historically the Work Group approach in the iGT UNC has managed reasonably well for modifications that are purely related to the commercial operation of the code. However, where the commercial changes also require the introduction of new system file formats or the amendment of existing ones the Work Group approach has not worked at all well. Historically the initial file formats that have been developed have had numerous changes made and have taken many iterations before it appears that the group is satisfied that the file formats can be accepted. Discussions have “see-sawed” on all of the following areas; data items to be included, relevant data items, classifications (Mandatory, Optional, Conditional), field lengths, allowed values, file names, guidance notes for completion etc. Even at the consultation stage parties have identified areas where there are problems with the proposed formats which then results in the Panel sending the proposal back to the Work Group.

It has been suggested that one reason for this is that whilst in general Work Group attendees are very knowledgeable about commercial issues they are not IT specialists. As such, they have to take file formats back to the IT specialists in their respective organisations for their input. However, it has not always been straightforward to identify the point at which such individuals should be involved as it is probably not efficient to involve them before the commercial aspects of the modification have been generally agreed and the business rules have been fully established.

In the UNC this issue appears to be better managed as, in addition to the commercial Work Groups, they also have the UK Link group in which the system related issues of modifications can be discussed. Also, there is only one central system provider who is responsible for documenting and maintaining areas such as file formats and can act as the final arbiter where shippers cannot themselves agree. However, in the iGT UNC there are multiple iGTs as well as multiple shippers who each have their own systems and with no single party being able to make the “final decision”.

Whilst this area may become less of an issue once Single Service Provision is implemented there will still continue to be areas where there are direct communications between iGTs and shippers. No doubt the industry will also continue to seek to standardise these wherever possible.

Way Forward

The Workstream is asked to consider this issue and recommend ways in which it may be improved. For example, one option may be to use the Sub Group facility that is set out in the iGT UNC Modification Rules (Clause 19). Under this approach the modification Work Group may reach a point where there is clarity on what data needs to be exchanged between parties and, request that a Sub Group be established to take forward and agree the exact way in which this data will be communicated. The expectation is that the members of this Sub Group would be IT specialists who would be better placed to discuss and agree the issues described earlier. The Sub Group would report back to the main Work Group with its deliverable being the agreed file formats.

However, there may equally be other ways in which the management of the issues could be improved.