



INTERNAL OPERATIONAL GUIDELINES

**For use by the GSTC Secretariat and
Assurance Panel**

(public)

12 May 2022

1. GOVERNING FRAMEWORK

- 1.1. The GSTC Assurance procedures are governed in the first instance by the GSTC Bylaws May 28, 2020, Article IX. The relevant extract from the Bylaws is provided at Attachment A.
 - 1.1.1. All the GSTC Recognition procedures are governed in the second instance by the GSTC Recognized Manual v5.0 28 May 2020.
 - 1.1.2. All the GSTC Accreditation procedures for Certification of Hotels/Accommodations & Tour Operators are governed in the second instance by the GSTC Accreditation Manual v2.5 27 April 2021.

2. ROLE OF OPERATIONAL GUIDELINES

- 2.1. These guidelines serve to interpret and clarify the procedures in the bylaws and provide more detail of the processes. They may be modified at any time by the GSTC Assurance Panel, in accordance with bylaws, section 2.1.

3. RECOGNITION PROCESS (GSTC SECRETARIAT, TECHNICAL DIRECTOR (TD) ASSOCIATE TECHNICAL DIRECTOR (ATD) ROLES)

- 3.1. A standard owner must complete the following documents and submit them to the GSTC Secretariat electronically to td@gstccouncil.org:
 - 3.1.1. Application for recognition on the GSTC application form (available on the GSTC Website: [Here](#) for Industry and [Here](#) for Destinations)
 - 3.1.2. Equivalency matrix, in English, between the candidate standard and the GSTC Benchmarking criteria
 - 3.1.3. The full text of the standard to be recognized, in its native language, and in English translation
 - 3.1.4. Evidence of payment of the required fee.
- 3.2. The Secretariat will respond within three (3) business days, acknowledging receipt of the documents, and requesting additional information if items are missing or incomplete.
- 3.3. If the documentation is not completed correctly within one month, the application will be rejected and the fee returned, minus processing charges as set out in the GSTC price sheet.
- 3.4. Once satisfied that the application is complete, the GSTC Secretariat (Assurance Manager) will assign the assessment to one of the Associate Technical Director (ATD) known as the “assessor”. Depending on workloads or potential conflict of interest, it can instead be assigned to a technically competent person from a list approved by the CEO. The list may include members of the Panel, who, if assigned, will not participate in the review process conducted by the Panel (see process outlined in Section 4).
- 3.5. The assessor will advise the Panel Chair of the receipt of the completed application and expected timeframe for its delivery to the Panel. An assessment should be completed within 15 business days of receipt of the completed application and equivalency matrix.
- 3.6. The assessor will submit his or her assessment of the equivalence of the standard with the GSTC Criteria as follows:
 - 3.6.1. The equivalency matrix includes the full text of each of the GSTC Criteria.
 - 3.6.2. The assessor shall evaluate the equivalence of the criteria of the standard to be evaluated with each of the GSTC criteria using for this purpose the column of the matrix reserved for GSTC use. The evaluation may include whatever text is

appropriate, including reference to outside materials such as the environmental, social, or cultural circumstances or legislation in the geographic scope of the standard, or the standard's auditing or evaluation guidelines, among others.

- 3.6.3. Based on an assessment against each GSTC Criterion and having regard for the "Suggested Performance Indicators and Panel Policy Decisions and Comments" (GSTC Industry Criteria for Hotels available [Here](#) and GSTC Industry Criteria for Tour Operators available [Here](#)), the assessor will make an informed judgment of the equivalence of each GSTC Criterion in the column reserved for GSTC use, indicating "equivalent", "further evidence required", "judgment call by the Panel", "not equivalent", or "omitted". (**Equivalence is determined by the expected outcome under local conditions, not equivalent wording.**)
- 3.6.4. The standard owner may submit one or more criteria that individually or collectively establish equivalence with a single GSTC Criterion.
- 3.6.5. The standard can be GSTC-Recognized even if all criteria are not mandatory. Mandatory applicability during the certification process should be indicated in the "mandatory" field of the application matrix. For a certification program seeking to be GSTC-Accredited, however, each of the criteria that match the GSTC Criteria must be mandatory, and it must demonstrate that all certified businesses and activities comply with all of the GSTC Criteria.
- 3.6.6. Criteria may be omitted without prejudice to Recognition under the following circumstances:
 - 3.6.6.1. The Criterion is not applicable, given the scope of the standard. For example, a standard with a scope of urban hotels in France would not need to demonstrate a criterion for codes of conduct with indigenous communities. However, a standard with a scope of all Europe would need to do so. Another example is that some criteria are applicable to lodging establishments and might not be applicable for a standard whose scope is specific guided tours. In all cases, convincing evidence must be presented that the criterion is outside the scope of the standard.
 - 3.6.6.2. Standard that are used in more than one country must have criteria that match each GSTC Criterion, except as above. However, standards that are used in only one country or a smaller region may be able to demonstrate with convincing evidence that (a) the criterion is covered by legislation, (b) the specific laws must be identified, (c) the laws are enforced, and (d) the standard or the auditors' verification manual requires demonstrated compliance with applicable laws. Acceptable evidence may include (a) a criterion that fully matches GSTC Criterion A.2 requiring compliance with relevant legislation, (b) a requirement for a legally-binding sworn statement by the organization to be certified with respect to compliance with specific, named laws and regulations, (c) text from the auditors' manual or verification criteria indicating that compliance with specific, named laws and regulations will be verified during the audit.
- 3.6.7. The assessor will submit to the applicant/standard owner, the annotated matrix and a draft letter addressed to the Panel recommending Recognition, conditional Recognition, or rejecting Recognition. The letter should indicate:
 - 3.6.7.1. The scope of the standard, including industry sector and geographic scope.

- 3.6.7.2. The specific reasons for the recommendation, including citations of each criterion that is judged to be non-equivalent or omitted, as well as the text of the justification from the standard owner.
- 3.6.7.3. Once comments are received, they will be incorporated by the TD/ATD, who will submit the matrix, the standard, and the recommendation letter to the Assurance Panel Chair.
- 3.6.8. Members of the GSTC Secretariat and Associate Technical Directors (ATDs) are required to submit annual updates of their Conflict of Interest statement.

4. RECOGNITION PROCESS (Panel's Role)

4.1. The Chair of the Panel will assign the review of the documents as follows:

- 4.1.1. In the case of a recommendation for non-recognition, the documents will be submitted to the entire Panel for comments. If no objections to the Secretariat's recommendation are received within two (2) weeks, the chair will authorize the TD/ATD to advise the standard owner that the standard has not been recognized, in a letter that cites the specific reasons for rejection and inviting re-submission when the non-conformities are corrected. Panel members will not be paid a fee for this review.
- 4.1.2. If more than 2 Panel members object to the non-recognition, the application should be treated as an application for review and the processes set out below i.e. from 4.1.3 onwards will apply.
- 4.1.3. In the case of a recommendation for Recognition or conditional Recognition, the Chair will invite Panel members to indicate their availability to undertake the review within the following 10 business days. Any conflict of interest will need to be declared by Panel members, thus removing that Panel member from that review process.
- 4.1.4. The Chair will accept the first three (3) eligible nominations to review the recommendations from the TD/ATD. The Chair of the Panel will email the evaluation matrix and recommendation from the assessor to the 3 Panel members who have been assigned to the task and will also assign a co-ordinator from the three (3) members of the sub-group.
- 4.1.5. The co-ordinator is responsible for requesting further information, if required by any sub-group member, from the assessor and must co-ordinate comments from the sub-group, complete the final column of the evaluation matrix based on a consensus view, and return the final comments and decision to the assessor (cc Chair of the Assurance Panel). This decision by the sub-group is considered to be a decision by the Panel.
- 4.1.6. To maintain transparency of the process of review, sub-group members are asked to annotate the matrix in their own column next to the assessor's comments. This matrix (and relevant email exchanges) will be kept by GSTC in case of any appeal.
- 4.1.7. Those members who submit written comments within 10 business days of the request for comments, will be paid the agreed fee per person per standard reviewed, to be invoiced and paid quarterly. For this purpose, a contract must be signed with the GSTC Secretariat.
- 4.1.8. The sub-group's conclusions must be agreed by at least two (2) members of that sub-group. The sub-group will either recommend granting of full

Recognition, rejecting the Recognition or it may recommend Conditional Recognition and propose a time frame for re-submission of the application. Past practice has been to permit Conditional Recognition for a period of between 6 and 12 months depending on factors such as the standard's complexity, when the standard is scheduled to be completely reviewed, requirement for consultation with stakeholders and need for translation.

- 4.1.9. The recommendations of the sub-group with the completed matrix, will be remitted to the assessor by the coordinator of the sub-group (cc Chair, Assurance Panel). The assessor will then draft a letter to the standard owner accordingly.
- 4.1.10. This letter will be submitted to the chair, who will make any necessary changes and remit it to the standard owner in its final form (cc CEO, TD/ATD, Chair GSTC and General Manager. It will also be provided in confidence to all panel members for their information only).
- 4.1.11. When a standard who has been granted conditional Recognition or who has been denied recognition resubmits the standard and the matrix with all conditions addressed, to the TD/ATD for re-assessment, the TD/ATD will provide recommendations which will be passed through the Chair of the Panel to, members of the original sub-group. The sub-group members will review only the actions taken to correct the conditions. Where there are more than 5 conditions, the standard owner must be advised when conditional Recognition is granted, that there will be a fee for re-application to remove the conditional Recognition. This re-application fee is specified on the GSTC website.
- 4.1.12. For removal of five (5) or fewer conditions, once the TD/ATD has referred the recommendations to the Chair of the Panel, the original sub-group that made the decision to grant conditional Recognition, should be asked to review the recommendations within five (5) business days. No additional fees or honoraria will be charged.
- 4.1.13. Where there were more than five (5) conditions imposed, each member of the sub-group reviewing the removal of the conditions will be entitled to be paid the agreed fee.
- 4.1.14. Members of the GSTC Assurance Panel are required to submit annual updates of their Conflict of Interest statement.

5. APPEALS PROCEDURE REGARDING A DECISION ON GSTC RECOGNIZED STATUS

5.1. APPEALS PANEL TERMS OF REFERENCE

- 5.1.1. Up to three members will be appointed to each Appeals Panel, at the invitation of the GSTC CEO on behalf of the GSTC Board.
- 5.1.2. Members will have knowledge of accreditation and standards and may seek additional advice as they see fit.
- 5.1.3. Persons not from the GSTC Assurance Panel shall be enrolled as members of the Appeals Panel, ensuring that the Appeals Panel has the expertise, balance of interests and impartiality required to make a decision.

- 5.1.4. Members of the Appeals Panel members shall be independent and impartial, with no conflict of interest to the appeal in question.
- 5.1.5. Members of the Appeals Panel will be requested to sign a confidentiality agreement if they have not already done so.
- 5.1.6. One member of the Appeals Panel shall be appointed by members of the Panel to act as its Chair.

5.2. APPEALS PROCEDURE

- 5.2.1. The GSTC CEO shall appoint a staff member not directly involved with the appeal to act as Secretary to the Appeals Panel.
- 5.2.2. The GSTC CEO shall forward all information related to the appeal to members of the Appeals Panel.
- 5.2.3. The Chair of the Appeals Panel shall determine the most appropriate method to review the appeal. It may be conducted by conference call, email or by meeting.
- 5.2.4. Any party may be requested by the Appeals Panel to provide additional information, attend in person meetings (at each party's cost) or participate in conference calls as required.
- 5.2.5. Parties may be asked by the Appeal Panel chair to present oral arguments at an in-person review meeting. Use of lawyers for this purpose is not allowed; the parties involved shall represent themselves.
- 5.2.6. Reasonable efforts shall be made to ensure that all parties have an opportunity to put their case to the Appeals Panel, with a general preference for the written form.
- 5.2.7. The Appeals Panel shall make its own operating rules and procedures as necessary.
- 5.2.8. The Appeals Panel shall bear in mind the grounds for appeal:
 - 5.2.8.1. Should the grounds for appeal be that the GSTC has failed to follow its own procedures, the Appeals Panel shall limit its investigation to whether or not the procedure has been followed.
 - 5.2.8.2. Where the procedure is unclear or is silent on a matter, the GSTC's interpretation of a requirement shall prevail unless it is felt by the Appeals Panel to be against best practice for the standards and/or certification industry, or against the principles of natural justice;
 - 5.2.8.3. Should the grounds for appeal be that the GSTC has incorrectly interpreted a requirement of the GSTC Criteria Components, the GSTC International Standards Committee shall be asked to provide an interpretation which shall be binding;
 - 5.2.8.4. Should the the grounds for appeal be that the GSTC has incorrectly interpreted a requirement of its own procedure, the GSTC Assurance Panel shall be asked to provide an interpretation which shall be binding;
- 5.2.9. No timescales are defined but it is recommended that the appeal review is held within 60 days of the formation of the Appeals Panel, and the appeal decision be made within 30 days of the Appeals Panel's review.
- 5.2.10. While a consensus approach to decision making is desirable, if this is not possible the appeal decision shall be made by simple majority vote. In the event of a tied vote, the Chair of the Appeals Panel has a casting vote.
- 5.2.11. The Appeals Panel will communicate their decision, which will be binding, to all parties and no further appeal shall be permitted.

- 5.2.12. Copies of the decision of the Appeals Panel shall be forwarded to the appellant and GSTC personnel as appropriate by the Secretary of the Appeals Panel within seven days of the decision being made.
- 5.2.13. The GSTC shall be responsible to ensure that the appellant undertakes any required actions, and for taking any actions for which it is itself responsible.
- 5.2.14. The GSTC shall verify that effective actions have been taken.
- 5.2.15. Where required the GSTC CEO will take follow-up action.
- 5.2.16. On completion of the appeal all records will be forwarded to the Secretary of the Appeals Panel for retention.

6. ACCREDITATION OF CERTIFICATION BODIES – INDUSTRY SCOPE

- 6.1. The GSTC's contractor partner Accreditation Body shall provide the GSTC Assurance Panel with the accreditation evaluation report containing the assessment team's recommendation as to whether or not accreditation should be granted.
 - 6.1.1. The GSTC Assurance Panel shall have 15 business days to provide comment for new accreditations.
 - 6.1.2. The GSTC Assurance Panel shall have 10 business days to provide comment for renewal of accreditations.

7. ACCREDITATION OF CERTIFICATION BODIES – DESTINATION SCOPE

- 7.1. The GSTC Assurance Panel function as an Accreditation Body for GSTC Accreditation for Destinations.
 - 7.1.1. Each sub-group member of the Panel will be entitled to be paid the agreed fee per application for accreditation.
- 7.2. Should the GSTC Assurance Panel have reason to be concerned about the ongoing conformity of an already GSTC Accredited Certification Body with the GSTC Accredited Requirements., it may require the Certification Body to provide further information.
 - 7.2.1. The GSTC Secretariat shall act on behalf of the GSTC Assurance Panel to ascertain actions to ensure compliance to the GSTC Accreditation requirements by the CBs. Actions may include, but not limited to:
 - 7.2.1.1. Desk review of audits reports of certifications issued by the CB since the date of accreditation or renewal of accreditation.
 - 7.2.1.2. Verification of Non-conformities and recommendations raised by the Panel in previous assessment (e.g., initial accreditation or renewal of accreditation)
 - 7.2.1.3. Review of CB's certification procedures
 - 7.2.1.4. Review of complaints, stakeholders' input or other relevant information related to the performance of the CBs received by the GSTC since the date of accreditation or renewal of accreditation.
 - 7.2.2. Based on the action ascertained, the GSTC Secretariat shall request access to documentation from the CB. The CB shall cooperate with the GSTC and provide access to documentation of certification process, their operations and scope of accreditation.

7.2.3. The GSTC Secretariat will conduct the actions per the list in clause 7.2.1 and prepare an evaluation report. The evaluation report will be submitted to the GSTC Assurance Panel for their decision.

8. ASSURANCE PANEL CHAIR: DEPUTY CHAIR

- 8.1. The Assurance Panel Chair shall designate a Deputy Chair from within the Assurance Panel to enable the full functioning of the Panel during the Chair's absence.
- 8.2. In cases of the absence of the Assurance Panel Chair, the Deputy Chair will be requested to act as Chair of the Panel and will be entitled to the same payments as the Chair would have been paid for the duties as set out below. These will be advised directly to the Deputy Chair.
- 8.3. The main duties of the Deputy Chair include:
 - 8.3.1. Form a sub-group Panel to review recommendations from the GSTC Associate Technical Directors for either Recognition of Standards or Accreditation of Certification Bodies.
 - 8.3.2. Coordinate with the sub-group members of the Panel to assign a Coordinator within the sub-group Panel and ensure the applications' review are completed within the agreed timeframes.
 - 8.3.3. Liaise with the GSTC Associate Technical Directors for final editing and despatch by the Chair of Recognition or Accreditation Letters to applicants.
 - 8.3.4. Coordinate with the GSTC Secretariat (Assurance Manager) to ensure appropriate administrative procedure (additional fees for review) are followed, if required.
 - 8.3.5. Other duties set out in section 4 Recognition Process (Panel's Role)

ATTACHMENT A

ARTICLE IX. ASSURANCE PROGRAM (Extract from GSTC bylaws, May 25, 2020)

Section 1. Purpose.

The GSTC shall provide assurance services for standards owners and the certification community. GSTC will (1) **Recognize** sustainable tourism standards and systems as equivalent to the GSTC Criteria; (2) Offer accreditation or similar forms of assurance of certification bodies (CBs) either;

- A. **Recognition of Standards and Systems:** GSTC shall determine whether a standard is equivalent to the GSTC Criteria and the associated GSTC benchmarking criteria; upon which it will be declared a **"GSTC-Recognized Standard"**;
- B. **Accreditation of Certification Bodies:** GSTC will endorse, train, and establish agreements with competent international and national accreditation bodies, and may function as an accreditation body for certain subsectors of tourism. An endorsed accreditation body will determine the competence of a CB to certify that tourism businesses or activities comply with the GSTC Criteria or a GSTC-Recognized standard.

Section 2. The Assurance Panel

2.1 The GSTC Assurance Panel ("the Panel") shall execute GSTC Assurance Programs as determined by the Board.

2.2 These duties may include but are not limited to:

2.2.1 Declare standards to be "GSTC-Recognized" according to the terms of the GSTC Recognition of Standards Manual as approved by the CEO and the Board.

2.2.2 Validate and provide surveillance of GSTC's contracted partner Accreditation Body (or Bodies) declarations of "GSTC-Accredited certification bodies".

2.2.3 Function as the accreditation body for specified subsectors.

2.3 Policies and procedures for the GSTC Assurance Program shall be developed in collaboration between the Assurance Panel and the Secretariat. In the event that the Panel and the Secretariat cannot agree on policy issues, the Board shall determine the policy.

2.4 The Panel shall operate independently of the GSTC Board and executive staff regarding specific applications.

2.5 The Panel shall have no involvement with the day-to-day administrative operations of GSTC and none of the responsibilities, legal obligations or liabilities associated with being a Director. GSTC shall indemnify all Panel members against any claims made against them.

Section 3. Composition.

The Panel shall have no less than five (5) members. The members should represent a balance of interests with no single interest predominating. Members will be invited by the Panel Chair with consultation of the Secretariat. Members should demonstrate an understanding of and experience with the principles of sustainable tourism and conformity assessment in accordance with GSTC selection criteria for Assurance Panel membership. The Panel Chair will be appointed by the GSTC Board.

Section 4. Conflict of Interest.

4.1 Panel members may not serve as GSTC Board members; however the Chair of the Panel may serve as a non-voting member of the GSTC Board. Panel members may not be direct employees of

an accreditation body, certification program, or conformity assessment body that seeks Recognition or Accreditation from the GSTC, however members may offer advice or consultancy to such

entities, provided that they recuse themselves from any decisions related to that entity for at least 24 months since their last activity. In the event of a real or perceived conflict of interest, a member of the Panel shall recuse him or herself from decisions related to the potential conflict of interest. The Chair has the right and obligation to recuse Panel members from joining subgroups created to review and decide upon specific applications if he/she determines that real or perceived Conflict of Interest may impede the credibility of the Panel's decision. Under this Section, a conflict of interest is defined as voicing an opinion, voting or making a decision affecting organizations or activities in which a panel member has a continuing, recent past or forthcoming interest.

4.2 Panel members shall be required to submit a declaration of Conflicts of Interest to the Chair, and shall notify the Chair of any future amendments to the original declaration.

Section 5. Conditions.

Meetings will be convened by the chair, by email, with at least two weeks of anticipation. Written minutes of each meeting shall be taken and approved by the Panel members at the following meeting. All non-confidential information shall be made available to GSTC members. Honoraria, to be determined by the GSTC Board, may be paid to Panel members per decision or per meeting or both.

Section 6. Appeal of Assurance Panel Decisions.

The Panel decisions may be appealed to an Appeals Panel appointed by the GSTC Board.