

FAQ on the alignment of HQAI CHS audits & DG ECHO ex-ante assessment

Q1. What is the difference between CHS+ audits and ECHO Bridges?

CHS audits cover approximately 80% of DG ECHO's ex-ante requirements. The remaining 20% requires additional assessment activities. This strong alignment allows HQAI to offer its partners efficient options for conducting an ECHO ex-ante assessment:

- **CHS+ audits** combine CHS and ex-ante assessment requirements into a single audit process, eliminating the need for two separate audits. Because many audit activities overlap, they can be carried out once and used to assess both sets of criteria. For example, when auditors review documentary evidence, it can be assessed against both CHS and ECHO requirements simultaneously.

At the end of the audit, organisations receive both the CHS Audit Report and the ECHO ex-ante assessment report.

On average, an ECHO ex-ante assessment takes 15 working days. Through a CHS + Audit, the ECHO component requires only 6-8 auditor working days in addition to the CHS audit process. This reduces the total number of auditor working days compared to conducting the two separate assessment processes.

More information on CHS+ audits: https://www.hqai.org/en/our-services/CHS_audits_for_multiplepurposes/

- **ECHO Bridge audit** is designed for organisations that have concluded a CHS initial or renewal audit and whose onsite activities were conducted within the preceding 12 months. To conduct an ECHO bridge, HQAI auditors review the CHS audit findings and map them against ECHO ex-ante assessment criteria. This mapping identifies which ex-ante requirements are already answered through CHS audit findings and evidence. ECHO requirements that can't be answered by the CHS audit or are only partially covered, will be assessed during the ECHO Bridge audit activities. Auditors will plan and conduct targeted audit activities (document reviews, interviews, or checks) to answer these remaining requirements. Finally, the ECHO ex-ante assessment report is delivered.

On average, an ECHO ex-ante assessment can take 15 working days. The ECHO Bridge takes between 8 and 11 working days and can be completed in 1 - 2 months.

More information on ECHO Bridges: https://www.hqai.org/en/our-services/echo_bridge_audit/

Q2. Why is there a deadline of 12 months to conduct an ECHO Bridge following a CHS Audit?

The ECHO Bridge is only available to organisations that have already concluded a CHS initial/renewal audit. The Bridge must be conducted within 12 months of the onsite visits carried out during the CHS audit (not from the end of the audit!). This is to comply with DG ECHO's requirements stated in the ToR for the ex-ante assessments: i.e., the ex-ante assessment should cover the 12-month period ending on the day of the start of the assessment fieldwork (on-site procedures).

Q3. How do the ECHO Bridge or CHS+ work for federated organisations?

Provided that the entities undertaking an ex-ante assessment are within the scope of a CHS audit, HQAI can extrapolate the CHS audit results and then conduct separate bridge audit activities for each EU-based applicant. This could be conducted by the same auditor, with sequential bridge audit activities for each applicant, thereby forming a single audit process.

Q4. Can CHS independently verified organisations benefit from ECHO services (CHS+ or Bridge), or are these only for CHS-certified ones?

Yes, both CHS-certified and independently verified organisations can benefit from CHS+ audits and ECHO Bridges.

Q5. Can a CHS audit report be used instead of an ex-ante report?

No. CHS audit findings can inform an ex-ante assessment, but additional audit activities will be needed to address requirements that a CHS audit cannot address, and the ex-ante assessment report must be delivered in accordance with DG ECHO's format and guidelines. The CHS Audit Report alone is not sufficient / not recognised, it must be translated into the ex-ante report.

Q6. How can CHS certification support other ECHO audits not just the ex-ante one?

It depends on what these other audits are assessing (i.e. the audit criteria). So, to answer this question, an overlap analysis/mapping should be conducted between HQAI CHS audits and the specific criteria for the ECHO audit (or another audit). We certainly recommend that organisations share CHS audit reports with the auditor/reviewer carrying out the related assessment, so they can be used to inform the assessment and reduce duplication and assessment fatigue.

Q7. Can NGOs with validated CHS self-assessments be useful for a DG ECHO ex-ante assessment?

A CHS self-assessment cannot be used for an ECHO bridge audit by HQAI because the independence, accuracy, and impartiality of its findings cannot be assured. A CHS self-assessment may, nevertheless, be useful for an organisation preparing for a DG ECHO ex-ante assessment, by providing an understanding and analysis of its own systems and capacities.

Q8. As an organisation considering both DG ECHO and CHS assessment, is there an incentive to explore both?

The primary purpose of a CHS audit is not to replace or simplify donor audits, due diligence, or compliance processes. Its main objective is to independently assess, improve and strengthen an organisation's accountability and quality management practices against the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS). For organisations already interested in CHS certification or independent verification, one additional benefit is that CHS audit findings can also be used to streamline parts of the DG ECHO ex-ante assessment process and/or other assessments or due diligence processes where overlaps exist.

If an organisation is only interested in becoming or remaining a DG ECHO partner, there is generally no added efficiency in undertaking a CHS audit solely for the purpose of the DG ECHO ex-ante assessment. In such cases, it is recommended to proceed directly with a standard/full DG ECHO ex-ante assessment.

Q9. Does DG ECHO accept CHS audit results?

DG ECHO recognises the use of HQAI CHS audit findings within the ex-ante assessment process, as referenced in the DG ECHO Terms of Reference for ex-ante assessments. However, CHS audit results are not accepted as a standalone substitute for the DG ECHO ex-ante assessment. An official DG ECHO ex-ante assessment report remains mandatory to become or remain a DG ECHO partner.

Q10. To what extent does ECHO consider CHS verification outcomes?

See Q5 and Q9.

Q11. To what extent can CHS certification substitute DG ECHO ex-ante requirements?

Since there are similarities and areas of overlap between CHS audits and DG ECHO requirements, existing CHS audit evidence may reduce duplication of work, assessment time, and potentially overall assessment costs. However, it does not replace the ex-ante assessment. The DG ECHO ex-ante assessment remains a mandatory

and independently structured process required for partnership eligibility. A formal ex-ante assessment report is still required regardless of CHS status.

Q12. Which departments of an organisation are involved in a CHS audit or ECHO ex-ante assessment?

DG ECHO ex-ante assessments and CHS audits typically involve multiple departments depending on organisational structure. They generally include finance and accounting, compliance and internal control functions, management and staff at operations and programme level, HR and safeguarding functions, and others.

Q13. Can national NGOs that are not headquartered in the EU conduct ECHO ex-ante assessments?

ECHO Humanitarian Partnerships are only available to organisations that are legally registered as a non-profit in one of the EU Member States.

Q14. Can a CHS Renewal Audit concluded in September 2025 be used for an ECHO Bridge?

It depends on when the on-site visits of that Renewal Audit were conducted. Bridge activities must take place within 12 months of the on-site visits conducted during the last CHS Initial or Renewal Audit.

Example: if the onsite visits of the mentioned Renewal Audit took place in July 2025, the ECHO Bridge must be concluded by July 2026.

Q15. Can a CHS audit completed in 2025, with onsite audit work done at the beginning of the year, be used for an ECHO Bridge?

No. Bridge activities must take place within 12 months from the date of the on-site visits conducted in the last CHS Initial or Renewal Audit. In this case, the Bridge must have taken place before 2026. The ECHO Bridge is no longer possible.

A CHS+ might be possible at the next Renewal Audit in 2027-2028. If this is too late, then the only remaining option is a full ex-ante assessment.

Q16. Has the mapping between CHS:2014 and ex-ante requirements been shared with DG ECHO?

Yes. It was shared with DG ECHO E2 team in 2020. The mapping will be reviewed against CHS:2024 using the updated ex-ante assessment framework (expected to be published in June 2026), and the results will be re-shared with DG ECHO.

Q17. Can maintenance audits be used for ECHO Bridges?

On-site audit assessments are required for ECHO Bridges. Therefore, the answer is no: maintenance audits cannot be used for this purpose. Only CHS initial or renewal audits with on-site fieldwork conducted within the past 12 months are eligible.

Q18. Can compliance load be reduced when CHS and ECHO timelines do not match?

Not through CHS+ or ECHO Bridge mechanisms. However, reuse of documentation and evidence collected during CHS audits may help streamline the ex-ante assessment process and reduce preparation time.

Q19. Can a CHS renewal audit be upgraded to CHS+?

Yes. When you reach out to HQAI or HQAI reaches out to you to start planning your next renewal audit, you can discuss including the ex-ante assessment requirements and conducting a CHS+ audit. Given HQAI's limited

capacity, we do encourage organisations to express their interest in CHS+ Audits and ECHO Bridges as soon as possible.

Q20. Does HQAI qualify to meet DG ECHO's requirements for auditors as outlined in the Terms of Reference for ex-ante assessments?

Yes. HQAI has already conducted several ECHO ex-ante assessments, all of which have been accepted by DG ECHO.

DG ECHO has specific requirements for auditors conducting ex-ante assessments. HQAI ensures that only auditors who meet DG ECHO criteria lead ex-ante assessments.

Q21. Can a renewal cycle be aligned with DG ECHO ex-ante cycle?

CHS renewal audits cannot be postponed due to their validity dates, but they can potentially be brought forward. This depends on specific organisational timing and audit scheduling constraints. Adjustments would need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis to ensure compliance with both CHS and DG ECHO validity requirements.

Q22. How long does a CHS+ audit take?

The duration of a CHS+ audit is similar to the duration of a standard CHS audit process:

- For organisations new to the CHS and CHS audits: ca. 6 months from application to reports finalisation.
- For organisations using their CHS renewal audit as a combined (CHS+) audit: 4 months.

Q23. How long does the ECHO Bridge audit take?

Approximately 6-8 auditor working days distributed over 2 months.

Q24. Will there be published guidelines mapping CHS audit findings to ECHO efficiencies?

Yes. HQAI is waiting for DG ECHO to publish the revised ToR for the ex-ante assessment. Following the publication, HQAI will review the mapping between the ex-ante assessment requirements and the CHS:2024. The results of the mapping will be widely shared as HQAI would like more auditors to find efficiencies in ECHO ex-ante assessments.

Q25. Who can provide CHS+ and ECHO Bridge services?

Currently HQAI is the only accredited conformity assessment body providing CHS audits. Therefore, CHS+ audits can also only be done by HQAI.

ECHO Bridges can be done by any auditor. ECHO's ToR for ex-ante assessments states that other third-party assurance services can be used to inform the ex-ante assessment. In practical terms, any auditor can leverage other audit findings to answer and complete the ex-ante assessment, including CHS audit results.