

LICENSE TO PLUMB

Tim Sainty explores whether the UK should introduce a licensing system for plumbers

CIPHE

Currently, there are no legal requirements needed to set up a plumbing business in the UK. When you consider the amount of technical knowledge and skill that goes into the profession, it is really quite shocking for this to be the case.

Of course, working on gas means that being on the Gas Safe Register is essential. Likewise, a minimum standard of qualification is necessary to work on electrics.

However, when it comes to working with water, it is still possible for anybody to declare themselves a plumber without explanation or evidence.

In the past, the route into the plumbing and heating industry was clear – an apprenticeship. Although six to seven years of training was shortened to four, it still resulted in an NVQ Level 3 qualification or equivalent upon successful completion. Achieving this qualification was a passport to a world where proven skills and knowledge could be taken and used in almost any country.

However, things have changed in recent years and

the introduction of diplomas and short courses as entry points, alongside a fall in the number of apprenticeships being undertaken, has had the inevitable effect of a fall in standards. Of course, some highly committed and talented individuals will have started out this way, but the overall impact is clear.

In other countries, such as the United States, Hong Kong, Germany, and Australia, it is a legal requirement for plumbers to be licensed. In order to become licensed in these countries, an individual must undergo extensive formal training.

The CIPHE believes that a statutory licensing scheme in the UK would raise professional standards, reduce the number of public health issues arising from plumbing, and increase protection for consumers, while also delivering benefits for qualified professionals.

Working in a licenced environment would mean that members of the workforce who invest in education and training would no longer be competing with those who have not.

By providing clear guidance on what is necessary to gain and retain a license, professional plumbers and heating engineers can easily prove to customers they are competent, insured, and should a problem happen, the licensing body can dispassionately investigate and help to resolve issues.

Licensing shouldn't be treated as an optional extra, but as an essential step to provide a better regulated, and more professional and respected industry to be proud of. What an aspiration to have the UK plumbing and heating industry to be licensed and internationally well-regarded again.

However, while it still isn't law in the UK to be licensed, and there is no indication that this is going to alter significantly in the short-term, there are some signs that things are changing.

The recent release of Dame Hackitt's Review, and specifically chapter five of the final report, *Building a Safer Future – Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety*, is devoted entirely to the issue of competence.

Although the report is specific to high rise residential buildings, it does not prevent the wider construction industry from taking measures further.

Professional bodies, such as the CIPHE, are tasked with demonstrating and delivering leadership on issues of technical competence.

Suitably qualified CIPHE members can display competence and an ongoing commitment to continuing professional development (CPD) through their Engineering Council registration. CPD is already mandatory and evidence-based for those members, and Dame Hackitt recommends a move to extending this approach in high risk areas.

At the CIPHE, it is our aim to help members at every level to achieve their career goals. Displaying your ongoing training and development is only going to increase in importance as standards become ever more stringent in a bid to protect the public welfare.

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