

SNIFE

SCOTTISH AND NORTHERN IRELAND
PLUMBING EMPLOYERS' FEDERATION
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CEO's Blogs 2014

[WINTER IS ON ITS WAY- TIME FOR SOME PLUMBING REMINDERS](#)

[APPRENTICESHIPS HIT THE HEADLINES- AGAIN](#)

[FIXING FAULTS – A PROFESSIONAL APPROACH](#)

[THE ROLE OF *PLUMB HEAT*](#)

[SNIFE HELPS PLUMBERS TO BAG IT](#)

[SCOTTISH REFERENDUM RESULT- TIME TO TACKLE A GREY AREA OF DEVOLUTION](#)

[BUYER BEWARE? WHAT ABOUT SELLER BEWARE?](#)

[INVEST IN THE FUTURE](#)

[MAKE SURE YOUR TRAINING INVESTMENT IS WORTHWHILE](#)

[PLUMBING TOMORROW NEEDS APPRENTICES TODAY](#)

[STATISTICS TO ENCOURAGE AND DEPRESS](#)

[THE EXTRA “TOOLS” IN A SNIFE MEMBER'S TOOLBOX](#)

[ADVANTAGES OF BUILDING STANDARDS CERTIFICATION](#)

[CELEBRATE THE 5TH WORLD PLUMBING DAY](#)

[WILL 2014 SEE PLUMBING AND HEATING GETTING BENEFIT FROM RENEWABLES?](#)

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December 2014

WINTER IS ON ITS WAY- TIME FOR SOME PLUMBING REMINDERS

After the exceptional summer and autumn of 2014, it would be all too easy to forget that in the United Kingdom there is always a season called 'winter' and such seasons are almost always accompanied by periods of cold, frosty and sometimes snowy weather.

While winter is often the season when the heating systems installed and maintained by plumbers are most needed, it is also the time of year when problems with plumbing and heating systems are most inconvenient and sometimes most difficult to resolve. For several years, [SNIFE](#), in conjunction with [Scottish Water](#) and [Northern Ireland Water](#) has promoted some simple cold weather tips that all householders and property owners should have in mind in readiness for winter. Basic information such as:

- Keeping your home heated at all times
- Heating the roof space in very low temperatures
- Knowing where the mains stop valve is so you can turn off your water
- Having the contact details of a licensed SNIFE plumber to hand.

Just in case these messages have not already registered, helpful information is available at our winter tips website, don'tfreezeupthiswinter.com.

In the event that there is a period of severe winter weather it is likely that plumbing firms will be busy. It is especially important that during such times customers should not panic and call in the first plumber they come across. It is always sensible, even where someone has an existing relationship with a plumbing business to check that they are suitably qualified, whether there is a call-out charge and what the hourly rate will be. Remember too, that these rates may be higher if the emergency occurs during a holiday period (and many plumbing businesses close for holidays for two weeks over Christmas and New Year).

There is something inevitable about our seasons - even although they might not come at set times and might not always reflect the same weather patterns each year. Being prepared for plumbing problems makes sense. If we don't have to call a plumber this winter it might mean either that all appropriate steps were taken to protect our properties or else that winter was a continuation of the last two unusually good seasons.

November 2014

APPRENTICESHIPS HIT THE HEADLINES- AGAIN

Apprenticeships have been in the news again! Two recent stories relating to apprenticeships and the construction industry illustrate the often diverse nature of opinions on this subject.

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On the positive side, a [City and Guilds](#) and [Edge Foundation](#) survey demonstrated that the majority of parents questioned believed that young people following a plumbing course were more employable than those pursuing a law degree. This comes as no surprise to plumbing industry organisations like SNIFE, which have spent years encouraging bright and able young people to make plumbing their positive employment choice. In some cases, these young people could have qualified to go to university but took the decision to follow a vocational route instead. This trend has been welcomed within the industry, not least by colleges who have seen an improvement in the ability of their students to meet the demanding requirements of a Level 3 plumbing qualification. Parents are influential in the career/training choices made by their offspring so this report must be seen as good news for the future of recruitment into the plumbing industry. But we do need to reinforce and educate about the value of undertaking a modern apprenticeship so that parents view it as a good choice.

On the other hand, a number of prominent politicians, in anticipation of a construction industry skills shortage, have been urging employers to take on NEETs - young people not in education, employment or training. The implication that young people who, for whatever reason, have become disengaged from the education or employment process would make suitable recruits for our industry suggests a lack of understanding of the nature of the training which is required to become a qualified plumber. There may well be some NEETs who will make good plumbers but we really need to change the mind set that leads people to think that if you become a plumber if you can't do anything else or are not bright enough to continue in education.

We would like to see a greater understanding among politicians of the meaning and significance of a plumbing apprenticeship and we would encourage them all to read the [City and Guilds/Edge Foundation report](#).

Although this won't have featured in newspapers along with reports and comments mentioned above, [SNIFE Training Services Ltd](#) (which manages most plumbing apprenticeship training in Scotland) has seen a 10% increase in the number of new apprentices this year. This welcome increase comes after several years in which the level of recruitment was about 50% lower than prior to the economic recession. It is hoped that the upward trend will continue, so that when workload improves, plumbing will not suffer from the type of skills shortages experienced after previous recessions.

October 2014 FIXING FAULTS – A PROFESSIONAL APPROACH

As the leading trade organisation for the plumbing and heating engineering industry in Scotland and Northern Ireland we take pride in the fact that our members are skilled professionals who deliver high standards to their customers. However, things can go wrong occasionally and a key benefit of SNIFE membership is our independent complaints resolution procedure, which affords both customer and member firm peace of mind when difficulties arise.

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We know that our members want their customers to be happy with the service they receive as this leads to repeat business and recommendations. We therefore have an established complaints process for helping customer and firms resolve problems professionally, efficiently and amicably; this is one of the terms under which [licensed plumbing businesses](#) operate and all member firms should be aware of the process.

In the event of a customer having a complaint about domestic work undertaken by a member firm we advise that the first step is to raise the matter in writing with the firm's management who should aim to resolve it as quickly as possible. If, after a reasonable time period, no resolution has been reached, customers should be advised that they can [contact the Plumbing Industry Licensing Scheme Customer Liaison Officer](#) for advice and assistance. The Customer Liaison Officer will try and resolve the complaint through a process of mediation between customer and the business. In the unlikely event the complaint remains unresolved, the Customer Liaison Officer can refer the matter to the Plumbing Industry Licensing Scheme Complaints Panel, which will make a full assessment and may request a technical inspection of any work. The Complaints Panel has the power to uphold or reject a complaint and decide upon the requirement for remedial and corrective action.

More information about the process can be accessed [here](#) and we encourage all member firms to familiarise themselves with it and to contact the [Customer Liaison Officer](#) or the [Technical Officer](#) if they require any advice. At SNIFE, we believe that a mediation-based approach to complaints offers a fast and effective route to resolution and we are committed to supporting our members and their customers when these challenging situations arise. Look out for an article on this subject in the next issue of *Plumb Heat*, where we will examine case studies and offer useful guidance to firms in handling customer complaints.

THE ROLE OF *PLUMB HEAT*

Communication is a key activity for most organisations and SNIFE is no exception. The plumbing and heating trade association uses a number of printed and electronic media to communicate with a diverse audience including members, potential members, purchasers of plumbing services and other stakeholders. Earlier this year, it recognised the importance of effective communications by appointing a full-time Communications Officer.

Published quarterly, SNIFE's magazine, *Plumb Heat*, is seen as playing a key role in informing readers of industry developments and news. The Autumn 2014 issue has just been published and will have reached readers in the last week of September. It contains a range of topical articles on subjects as diverse as smart heating, Water Byelaws and new consumer contract regulations. This issue also provides a summary of the services available to member firms and each issue contains a diary highlighting some of the work in which SNIFE has been involved in the previous three months. Although traditional print media is under increasing challenge from electronic media, it is still felt that *Plumb Heat* has a useful role to play. For those who prefer to read online, the [latest issue](#) is also

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available on the [SNIPEF website](#) along with an archive of previous issues. SNIPEF is keen to receive suggestions about future content for *Plumb Heat* and these should be sent to the [editorial team](#).

SNIPEF HELPS PLUMBERS TO BAG IT

Plumbers visiting their local merchants recently might have met SNIPEF's Membership Officer, Andy Furneal. At least one morning a week, Andy has been setting up a SNIPEF stand at merchants' trade counters throughout the country where he can meet both SNIPEF members and non-members to talk about the benefits of [SNIPEF membership](#).

Ahead of the introduction on 20 October 2014 of a compulsory 5p charge for single use plastic carrier bags in Scotland, Andy will shortly be able to provide those he meets at trade mornings with a reusable SNIPEF bag which can be used time after time to take away the fittings and other materials purchased from merchants. The bags carry the SNIPEF logo and the message, 'Pride in Professional Plumbing'; a sentiment we hope will be shared by all those using the bags.

To find out when Andy will be in a merchant's showroom in your area, please follow him on Twitter, [@SNIPEFandy](#), and you can also follow the main [@SNIPEFnews](#) account for useful updates on issues affecting the trade.

September 2014

SCOTTISH REFERENDUM RESULT- TIME TO TACKLE A GREY AREA OF DEVOLUTION

SNIPEF adopted a neutral stance during the two-year Scottish Referendum campaign. It respected the fact that its membership included those on both sides of the debate and felt it was appropriate to wait for the result of the democratic process before making any form of public comment.

Whatever the outcome of the vote, SNIPEF would have looked very carefully at the implications for its members and the plumbing industry as a whole. While it was clear that a "YES" result would have meant that we would have to undertake an examination of a wide range of issues which could have impacted on plumbing, it is recognised that the decision that Scotland should remain within the United Kingdom does not mean that the status quo will apply.

Under the current devolution arrangements, a large number of issues relevant to plumbing firms are already the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament. Just as education is devolved, then so too are the arrangements and funding for apprenticeship training. Scotland has its own legal system. The Building Regulations and Water Byelaws under which plumbers in Scotland operate are made in Scotland and can differ quite significantly from those which apply in England, Wales or Northern Ireland.

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There is one aspect of the devolution settlement which has been a constant source of irritation to SNIPEF and its member firms. 'Consumer education' is devolved to the Scottish Parliament but 'consumer protection' is reserved to Westminster. This probably doesn't register high on the agendas of any of our politicians however, it can lead to problems on the ground. The difference between consumer education and protection is not always obvious. However, the reserved nature of consumer protection has enabled the Scottish Government to refuse to fund or support any industry initiatives which look like consumer protection. In our experience, Westminster has not been too interested in the different approaches to the subject which can be taken in Scotland. SNIPEF has always viewed this as one of the grey areas of devolution and we would like to see it being tackled now as part of the additional devolved powers which are to be granted.

In the coming months, SNIPEF plans to take a proactive stance on this issue and to watch very carefully for any other planned devolved powers which could impact on our industry.

September 2014

BUYER BEWARE? WHAT ABOUT SELLER BEWARE?

Most people will be familiar with the Latin phrase 'caveat emptor' meaning that buyers of any products or services should take care to understand what they are buying before they enter into a commitment. For example, SNIPEF would encourage all purchasers of plumbing services to use a SNIPEF member firm as the only sure way of getting a job done by a qualified plumber, working for a business with appropriate liability insurance and backed up by an independent complaints mechanism in the event that something goes wrong. Recent developments have illustrated how it is increasingly important that sellers of services, such as plumbing, should be equally aware of what they need to do before they make an error which could prove to be costly.

SNIPEF has recently had to make members aware of new consumer regulations which, unless followed properly, could make a contract to carry out domestic work ineffective. The regulations give [consumers cancellation rights](#) depending on where the contract is entered into. If, as is often the case, the agreement is reached in the customer's property, then the consumer has to be given 14 days cancellation rights. If the work starts before that period ends (as is fairly common) and the customer decides during that two-week period that they want to cancel, then they can do so. "A mess" is probably the best way to describe such a scenario. Omitting to advise the customer of their rights is an offence in itself. The days of work being done immediately after an order is received may well be over.

A SNIPEF member firm recently found that a customer declined to pay the VAT on the invoice issued by the firm as they had failed, in their quotation, to make clear the monetary (in pounds) amount of the VAT due. On advice from Trading Standards, the customer refused to pay the VAT and the member was left with an expensive debt which they were unable to recover. Although we question the accuracy of the advice provided to this customer, it was a situation that no plumbing business would wish to experience. We wonder how many other plumbing businesses could find they are in the same

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position? This experience has led SNIFE to issue [good practice advice](#) to its members to prevent others being caught in the same way.

Consumers need protection from rogue traders. This is largely because many people have failed to take appropriate precautions before buying goods or services. However, it seems at times that legislation which is aimed at protecting consumers has an unduly negative impact on legitimate and responsible traders. All plumbing contractors are encouraged to take care when selling their services so that they avoid the pitfalls that consumer legislation has put in their path.

August 2014 INVEST IN THE FUTURE

At this time of year the SNIFE Training Team are busy processing the latest cohort of apprentices who will begin their programme of training later this month. We have approximately 250 new apprentices signed up to the scheme this year, and while this figure is in line with recent years, we had hoped that we might see an increase as the recession loosens its grip on our industry.

Of course, many firms are stilling feeling the pinch, however things are looking much more positive so it makes sense to think about the future of your business and to plan ahead. A Modern Apprenticeship in Plumbing is a 4-year commitment for the young person involved and for the firm but the rewards can be great; not only are you investing in your business you are investing in young people, who, whichever way you look at it, are the future of our trade. By ensuring that aspiring plumbers receive the best training available you can future-proof your business and ensure that you have operatives who are fully conversant in traditional skills as well as in emerging technologies.

On completion of the scheme firms receive a bonus and this year SNIFE members received double the amount received by non-members. You can visit our [website](#) for further information or call one of the team if you would like to discuss the options. Our Regional Training Officers are based around Scotland and have a good understanding of things in your area. If you would like to speak with one of them please don't hesitate to contact us on 0131 556 0600 or by [email](#) and we would be pleased to set up a meeting.

August 2014 MAKE SURE YOUR TRAINING INVESTMENT IS WORTHWHILE

Although there may be an argument for saying that all training is good, people in the plumbing industry are urged to check that the training which they undertake will actually lead to a positive outcome.

During the last economic boom, when qualified plumbers were hard to find, there was an explosion in the number of fast-track training providers. Lured by claims that a plumbing qualification could be

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achieved within the space of a few months (or in some cases a few weeks), many people parted with large sums of money to enrol on the courses. What the training providers failed to highlight was that the 'qualification' achieved fell far short of the minimum levels required by businesses in the industry. The outcome for many was a depleted bank account (or even a debt), a meaningless piece of paper and little prospect of meaningful employment. There is a danger as the UK comes out of recession that these training providers will once again become active. Those thinking about a career change into plumbing would be well advised to check that the qualification will be recognised by the industry [in Scotland, the minimum qualification expected is a National or Scottish Vocational Qualification (N/SVQ) at Level 3].

Qualified plumbers wishing to upgrade their skills are also advised to check that the course on which they enrol will lead to an appropriate qualification. There are many [approval schemes](#) (in areas such as the installation of renewable technologies) which require the possession of specific qualifications. SNIPEF has seen many disappointed members who assumed that the training which they had undertaken would lead to them receiving approval under the appropriate scheme only to find that the course was not recognised. This leads to frustration and a waste of time and money.

#The message is clear for all. Before you undertake [plumbing industry training](#) which is aimed at getting you recognised, please check that the training course will lead to the appropriate outcome. SNIPEF would be only too happy to advise members before training is undertaken, call us on 0131 556 0600 or contact us via [email](#).

July 2014

PLUMBING TOMORROW NEEDS APPRENTICES TODAY

For over 30 years, [SNIPEF Training Services](#) has played a significant role in the training of plumbing apprentices. Plumbing is one of the largest recruiters and trainers of Modern Apprentices in Scotland. A significant proportion of the qualified plumbers working in Scotland started their careers under the supervision of SNIPEF Training Services.

The number of apprentices recruited each year depends on a range of factors including workload and business confidence about being able to sustain apprentices during their four-year training programme. At the start of the recent recession, recruitment fell by 50% reflecting the severe reduction in workload and considerable uncertainty facing most firms in the industry.

There has been no real increase in recruitment in subsequent years. Although the jury might still be out in deciding whether the longest and deepest recession in living memory is over, there are clear signs of things getting better. Past, painful experience has shown that when workload improves after a recession, skills shortages occur. While some qualified plumbers who lost their jobs over the last six years might come back to direct employment, many will not.

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SNIEPF believes that the best way of training the workforce of the future is through employed-status apprenticeships. Alternative approaches, either based only on college attendance or on fast-track solutions, do not produce the level or quality of apprentice needed. This means that those running plumbing businesses today are the only people who can make a difference by employing and training apprentices as an investment for both their business and the industry as a whole.

This is the time of year to recruit apprentices who will start their off-the-job college training in the autumn. Already done it? Good - and well done! Not yet recruited? Please contact [SNIEPF Training Services](#) now on 0131 556 0600.

If you are thinking about a career in plumbing a four-year apprenticeship gives you the opportunity to earn while you learn, providing the dual benefit of gaining a nationally recognised qualification whilst being paid as you work. You can find out more about careers in plumbing on our [website](#).

June 2014 STATISTICS TO ENCOURAGE AND DEPRESS

On the same day recently two sets of statistics were published which might have brought mixed messages of hope and despair to those running plumbing businesses.

On the positive side, Registers of Scotland announced that there had been a 23% increase in the volume of house sales in Scotland in the 12 month period to end March 2014. After a long period of sluggish property markets, it is not too surprising that things would improve at one stage and this is quite a significant improvement. House purchases are a measure of increased consumer confidence which might also be reflected in expenditure on home improvements. While not everyone who has just bought a new home will immediately undertake plumbing work on their new property, it is quite likely that there will be a fair amount of new kitchens, bathrooms and heating systems installed in many of these new homes. There is clearly an opportunity here which we hope will lead to work being awarded to professional plumbing businesses which have met the criteria to be members of SNIEPF.

The other statistic could well turn the opportunity mentioned above into a threat. The Federation of Master Builders announced that 55% of all householders admit to having asked a construction firm to accept cash payments in order to avoid the payment of VAT. The 20% rate of VAT is a problem and this research shows that it is leading to unacceptable behaviour which places legitimate professional businesses at a disadvantage. Even where a business refuses to become involved in this form of tax evasion, it is quite likely that there will be another business which doesn't have the same moral stance and is only too happy to do the work, helping both its customer and potentially itself with undeclared income. There have been campaigns for years to try to convince successive UK Governments that repairs and maintenance should have a lower rate of VAT applied. The benefits to the Exchequer could be significant and experience in other countries, where lower rates have been applied, shows that the approach also increases employment in the industry. It is sad that a Government policy of

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high taxation is leading to the promotion of the black economy. We must all take every opportunity to continue to highlight this problem.

May 2014

THE EXTRA “TOOLS” IN A SNIFE MEMBER’S TOOLBOX

Members of any voluntary organisation take a decision to join that organisation (and pay its fees) for a number of reasons. Plumbing firms in membership of SNIFE will have taken that decision based on a wide range of factors such as it is felt to be essential to be part of the industry’s national trade organisation or because being a SNIFE member is a requirement for a particular work contract.

Recent research among SNIFE members has highlighted that not all members are aware of the full range of benefits which are available to them and the organisation plans to carry out work in future which will remedy this lack of awareness. One of the advantages of being a member of SNIFE is that the firm can offer its customers and clients services which are generally not available to other plumbing and heating businesses. For example, only member firms can access the Legionella risk assessment and disinfection scheme which SNIFE has launched in conjunction with the trade association for firms in England & Wales (APHC). Providing peace of mind to landlords that their properties have been risk-assessed to prevent tenants being affected by Legionella is an important service. Another scheme which an increasing number of SNIFE members are taking advantage of is the Approved Certifier of Construction (Plumbing, Heating and Drainage) Scheme which SNIFE has operated with Scottish Government approval over the last few years. The self-certification that work meets the requirements of a building warrant is an important tool which reduced delays on contracts. SNIFE members who are participating in the WaterSafe approved plumber initiative have advantages over those firms which are unable to promote themselves as part of this UK-wide approvals scheme.

In addition to participating in schemes such as those listed above, SNIFE member have access to other unique benefits such as the organisation’s comprehensive advisory service which can save many members both money and pain (provided advice is taken at the earliest opportunity when a problem arises).

SNIFE members who need more information on any of the services available to them can either phone SNIFE for more details (0131 556 0600) or look on the organisation’s website (www.snipef.org) where further information on all of the services is available.

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April 2014

ADVANTAGES OF BUILDING STANDARDS CERTIFICATION

At a recent event in Edinburgh Castle, Scottish Government Minister for Local Government, Derek Mackay MSP, congratulated those involved in Approved Certifier of Design and Construction Schemes. The Minister also encouraged the future development of these schemes as an integral part of ensuring that Scotland's buildings meet appropriate standards.

SNIFE received ministerial approval to operate an Approved Certifier of Construction Scheme for plumbing, heating and drainage in 2010. Members which have joined the Scheme are able to self-certify that their work, subject to building warrant, complies with building standards. Self-certification provides advantages to both clients and contractors as it removes the potential for delays which can occur when waiting for work to be inspected by local authority building standards inspectors. Clients have the assurance that their work is being undertaken by appropriately qualified businesses and operatives which have met the criteria to join the Scheme. Contractors have the facility to display a logo indicating that they are approved under a Scottish Government scheme.

The message is steadily getting through. Interest in self-certification is growing within the plumbing and heating industry as more and more contractors recognise the benefits which self-certification could bring to their business. One SNIFE Approved business recently commented that this Scheme was bringing major time (and cost advantages) to the business.

Future development of self-certification may include its extension to non-warrantable work, increased cost incentives for clients to choose self-certification through a review of the present warrant fee discount arrangements and possibly an extension to other aspects of the construction process.

SNIFE welcomes the Minister's endorsement of self-certification and looks forward to this Scheme bringing increasing benefits to all involved in professional construction activities

March 2014



CELEBRATE THE 5TH WORLD PLUMBING DAY

Time really does fly and it seems just like the day before yesterday when the first ever World Plumbing Day was launched in 11 March 2010 in Beijing, China. Designed to create awareness of the

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role played by the plumbing industry in relation to public health, 2014 is likely to see an increased number of World Plumbing Day events taking place all over the world.

To date, the Day has been recognised in places as varied as the Scottish Parliament, the US and Canadian senates, the streets of cities in India and in venues across Australasia. Trinidad and Tobago is one of the smallest countries which have taken World Plumbing Day to heart.

One of the most powerful tools which has been developed to promote World Plumbing Day is a presentation to be used with primary school children. Using the presentation recently with three groups of Scottish school children, it was fascinating to see both their interest in the subject and also the knowledge which many of them already have about issues such as where water comes from and the limited supplies of fresh water available to the 7 billion+ people now inhabiting the earth.

In places like Scotland and Northern Ireland, where there is no shortage of fresh water and where sanitation is pretty efficient, it is all too easy to take plumbing for granted. We can turn on taps and drink the contents without concern and when we flush the toilet we can be reasonably sure that the contents will be treated safely. In such an environment, it isn't surprising that most people fail to recognise the role of plumbing in helping to maintain the integrity of the water supply and sanitation services. One doesn't need to travel too far from the United Kingdom, however, to find circumstances where plumbing, as we know it, is almost non-existent.

This World Plumbing Day, please take the opportunity of reminding everyone you meet, speak to or email that this is YOUR industry's day. Your industry deserves greater recognition and respect but it is likely to take many, many World Plumbing Days before this message is truly heard and understood.

February 2014 **WILL 2014 SEE PLUMBING AND HEATING GETTING BENEFIT FROM RENEWABLES?**

Many column inches and broadcast media minutes have been devoted recently to the subjects of energy efficiency and the role of renewable sources of energy. A number of plumbing and heating businesses have invested heavily to make sure that when consumer demand arrives, they are in a position to carry out the work (most of which is simply an extension of their existing portfolio of work). This investment will probably have included the costs of meeting expensive approval requirements and undertaking training in the appropriate technology. I touched on this in my August 2013 Blog.

As with any subject, there is a fair amount of spin and misinformation in what has been written and said about these subjects. There has also been a fair amount of disappointment on the part of some contractors who have made their investment only to find that consumer demand was not there. However, it is just possible that this year might be one in which we begin to witness something of a sea change in demand. A combination of factors including the continuing increases in the cost of

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traditional fuels along with the much heralded arrival of the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) could prove to be enough of an incentive to encourage more consumers to embark on the road of installing some form of renewable energy sources in their property. Although it is generally accepted that RHI will be of most benefit to consumers in areas which do not have access to natural gas, consumers in all areas could be attracted by the possibility of reducing their energy bills through either the use of renewables or the upgrading of existing equipment with that which is much more energy efficient.

Although there is still considerable scepticism in some quarters of the industry as to whether these technologies will ever really take-off, there are many around who recognise that there is something inevitable about more of this work being required in the future than has been the case to date. There is a danger facing established plumbing and heating businesses which stay in the unconvinced camp. That danger is that other businesses, which have no background or training in plumbing and heating, are only too ready and willing to take on any work which comes along. That would not be a good result for our industry nor would it necessarily lead to a happy outcome for customers of such businesses.

2014 might well prove to be the year when things change - are you ready to take advantage of the possibilities which might be coming?