

SNIFE

SCOTTISH AND NORTHERN IRELAND
PLUMBING EMPLOYERS' FEDERATION
Bellevue House • 22 Hopetoun Street
Edinburgh • EH7 4GH
Tel: 0131 556 0600 • Fax: 0131 557 8409
Email: info@snipef.org
www.SNIFE.org

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December 2013

BEST WISHES FOR CHRISTMAS AND THE NEW YEAR

As we approach the Christmas and New Year holiday period, I would like to wish all my blog readers a Happy Christmas and a positive and prosperous 2014.

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For many in the plumbing and heating industry, 2013 has seen a continuation of the exceptionally difficult trading conditions which have now lasted longer than most previous recessions in living memory. The past year has seen further businesses failing to survive the pressures which the recession has brought. Let us all hope that 2014 will be the year in which the industry and the country as a whole sees the light at the end of what has been a pretty long and dark tunnel.

It has been a busy year for SNIPEF campaigning on behalf of members on a wide range of subjects. Although little work has to date come out of the Government's much-heralded Green Deal, there has been some work for members via ECO funding and from the Green Homes Cashback scheme. Efforts continue to be put into trying to make the approval arrangements for schemes like this less onerous and less expensive and some progress has been made. SNIPEF has made arrangements for member firms who wish to get involved in this type of work to obtain training and approval. Training courses will be offered early in the New Year.

2014 will also see the launch of an approval scheme for firms wishing to undertake legionella risk assessment and disinfection work in rented property under the banner of the Plumbing and Heating Contractors' Alliance. (PHCA) This followed the introduction of a new ACoP by the HSE.

2013 also saw the launch of WaterSafe which has received widespread media coverage as a UK-wide database of approved plumbing businesses. SNIPEF Licensed Businesses are able to join WaterSafe at no extra cost and many have already done so. We wish WaterSafe every success as part of the ongoing campaign to promote professionalism in our industry at the expense of unscrupulous and unqualified operators who do so much harm to plumbing's reputation.

The SNIPEF offices will close for the holiday period at 1230pm on Tuesday 24 December 2013 and will re-open at 0830am on Monday 6 January 2014.

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PLUMBING CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS THE IMPORTANCE OF PLUMBING

If there was one common theme at the recent 10th World Plumbing Conference held in New Delhi, India, it was that throughout the world the plumbing industry is an important player in public health and safety. Having said that, it was generally acknowledged by most speakers and delegates that more needs to be done to raise the profile of our industry and to get people to have respect for their plumbing.

First-time visitors to India quickly become aware of the plumbing issues faced by many citizens of that country. Water supplies are not guaranteed and in many parts of the country, people have to rely on either stand-pipes or delivery vehicles to get water. Lack of effective sanitation is even more of an issue and one which inevitably has an impact on levels of health, sickness and even mortality. Although the conference hotel in New Delhi was well equipped in every sense (including its plumbing), delegates didn't have to travel too far to appreciate the inadequacy of the water and sanitation facilities in other parts of the city and country.

Although delegates from developed countries such as the UK, USA and Australia are not used to seeing such obvious plumbing problems on the streets of their cities, towns and villages, it became clear during presentations that significant problems nevertheless exist in such countries where legionella and other water-borne bacterial issues are increasingly compromising public health and leading to deaths. It is possibly because of this contrast that the level of understanding that plumbing is important is greater in places like India. Indian newspapers carry stories about water problems almost on a daily basis. One of the most inspirational speakers at the Conference had read a story about the amount of water which is wasted from dripping taps. This led him to create his own charity which sees him going out with a plumber every Sunday to repair such taps (free of charge) in local houses. How seriously do most people in the UK take dripping taps?

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Several years ago an Australian plumbing industry visitor to Scotland learned the phrase “We’re A’ Jock Tamson’s Bairns”. He then used that to illustrate that the world over people working in plumbing face the same challenges as those in other countries. The World Plumbing Conference in India helped to reinforce the message that we all need to do more to educate the industry’s customers and society at large that plumbing plays a crucial role in keeping people healthy.

November 2013

WILL PLUMBING SEE GROWTH IN 2014?

After one of the longest and deepest recessions in living memory, it is quite refreshing to hear so much talk (albeit cautious talk) about growth in the economy both this year and next.

The plumbing businesses which have survived the last 5 or 6 years must all wonder whether all the talk of green shoots of recovery will apply to them. It is a sad fact of economic life that construction and its allied trades are usually the first industries to go into recession and the last to come out. Although things are still patchy, there are certainly more businesses in our industry which are currently reporting increased activity (including in the area of house building which was so badly affected in the recession). Increased activity does not always mean increased profits and it still seems that the downward pressure on prices continues.

“Growth” in an economy is sometimes difficult for small businesses to identify with. The economists who spend so much time discussing whether growth will be 1% or 2% (or whatever) fail to explain, in simple terms, what such growth might actually mean (other than the opposite of recession). Recent predictions for the Scottish economy suggest that while there will be growth in 2014, it will still be lower than the average annual growth in that economy over the last 50 years. That doesn’t sound particularly exciting. The same research institute which came up with these predictions also stated that in the event that the Grangemouth oil refinery had closed recently then that single event would have

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removed all of the predicted growth for Scotland in 2014. That comment illustrates the sheer fragility of recovery. In Northern Ireland, which seems to have been even worse affected than Scotland, there are whispers of a turnaround but many commentators are still very cautious about how this might impact on small businesses working there.

As we approach the long dark days of winter, it is encouraging to hear positivity after such a long time. Let us all keep fingers and toes crossed that the current predictions will come to pass and that the future will indeed be brighter.

October 2013

SNIPEF MEMBERS CAN BENEFIT FROM LAUNCH OF WATERSAFE

While SNIPEF believes that there are too many separate “approval” schemes seeking to provide customers with assurances about the plumbing business they use, the imminent launch of a new national brand called “WaterSafe” is welcomed and seen as being something potentially very powerful.

SNIPEF has worked over the last two years with operators of six other schemes across the UK which approve plumbing businesses under the Water Regulations (Byelaws in Scotland) to develop this new national branding. While these individual schemes effectively did the same thing (and all had been approved by Westminster Ministers), they were not entirely consistent and were not well promoted to consumers. The concept behind WaterSafe is that all of these schemes will operate under the same rules and both the schemes and their members will be widely promoted using funding which has been provided by the water supply industry.

SNIPEF members which were already able to certify that their work complies with the Water Byelaws can now be part of this national brand without having to do (or pay) anything extra. It is hoped that the WaterSafe brand will become widely known and respected as providing

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customers with the most effective way of ensuring that their plumbing work is done safely and in accordance with the Regulations/Byelaws. The need for good plumbing is often taken for granted and many customers put their health and that of their families at risk by not insisting that their plumbing work is done by properly qualified plumbers employed by businesses which have met certain criteria (such as possessing valid liability insurance cover).

WaterSafe will be formally launched by a UK Government Minister on 8 October 2013 and there will be supporting promotion of the new scheme in each of the devolved administrations. If it succeeds, WaterSafe might help SNIPEF and the other scheme operators to achieve the goal which has eluded them for years - a general awareness of and use of competent and professional plumbers and a marginalisation of those who are not.

September 2013

Gas safety is important EVERY DAY

This month, SNIPEF will be joining a range of other organisations in promoting the importance of gas safety through Gas Safety Week (which runs from 16-22 September). Levels of awareness of the importance of gas being used safely have certainly improved in recent years. However, there are still too many tragedies arising from the use of gas in the UK which is why events like Gas Safety Week are relevant.

Gas is a fuel which is widely used by many people for day-to-day activities including heating water and buildings and cooking food. In many parts of the country, it is the fuel of choice for some or all of these activities. If used safely, then gas is great. The dividing line between safety and danger often, however, lies in the hands of the user and following a few simple steps should ensure that we get all of the benefits of the fuel without suffering any of the potential problems.

Regular maintenance of gas systems by a GasSafe Register installer is recommended by manufacturers of gas appliances and should be seen

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as a “must do” by everyone using the fuel. Many SNIPEF members carry out such work and customers using a SNIPEF and GasSafe contractor get the added assurances available to those engaging a member of the trade association (including a warranty scheme).

One of the greatest gas safety dangers is carbon monoxide (CO) - often known as the “silent killer” and SNIPEF welcomes the change in Scottish Building Regulations which will require the installation of CO monitors any time a boiler is fitted or replaced. This is a relatively simple and inexpensive addition which could prove to save lives.

Although it has been a legal requirement since 1990 for anyone working on gas for gain to be registered with an appropriate body (currently GasSafe Register), there are still some contractors and far too many customers who choose to ignore this aspect of the law. If the motivation in being unregistered or using an unregistered installer is to save money, then that could prove to be an expensive mistake all round.

Many registered gas installers find it frustrating that it is still perfectly legal for unregistered installers to buy gas appliances. SNIPEF is currently working with the equivalent organisation in England and Wales (the APHC) and a range of other organisations to try to find a way to address this anomaly.

While SNIPEF is pleased to highlight the importance of gas safety during Gas Safety Week, it encourages all involved in and affected by gas to think about the gas safety message EVERY DAY.

August 2013

SOME GOOD NEWS (AT LAST) FOR MICRO-RENEWABLE INSTALLERS?

It has been a while since this blog contained anything which might have been seen as “good news”. The recent announcement of the details of the domestic Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) Scheme by Greg Barker, the Minister of State at the Department of Energy & Climate Change

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(DECC), has been welcomed by many in the industry who have been waiting for something to stimulate the market .

It had taken some months for the final details to be confirmed but the RHI payments of 7.3p for air source heat pumps, 12.2p for biomass boilers, 18.8p for ground source heat pumps and 19.2p for solar thermal (per kW hour) should help these heat producing technologies become more attractive to install. Let us hope, however, that the Government has learned the lessons of its clumsy handling of Feed-in Tarriffs for PV installations which did damage to industry and consumer confidence.

This month also saw the completion of the first training programme for those apprentices who had chosen “Emerging Technologies” as part of their apprenticeship training programme. (The course, which is part of the Plumbing Modern Apprenticeship, includes training on heat pumps, solar thermal and grey and rainwater harvesting). This means that when these apprentices complete their training in 2014 they will be fully trained in the new micro-renewable technologies.

Finally, SNIFE, in conjunction with a number of other trade bodies, is appearing in this year’s Edinburgh Fringe Festival and will participate in the “Low Carbon Building Festival” which is taking place between 13 and 15 August. More details are available at www.lowcarbonfestival.org. Tickets are FREE and the event has attracted a wide and varied range of speakers.

July 2013

BE WARY OF "COWBOY" CUSTOMERS

As the general economy in the UK continues to struggle, it is not surprising that people in all walks of life seek to find ways of saving money. We read, for example, that the low-cost, no-frills supermarket which have popped up in many of our towns and cities are now taking an increased share of household grocery spending. People can find all sorts of perfectly legitimate and legal ways of making their money go further and there is absolutely nothing wrong with that.

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Most plumbing companies will have experienced another approach at saving money on the part of their potential customers. There are increasing reports of firms submitting quotations for work and then being asked how much the reduction would be if the customer paid in cash. Nothing particularly new in that- the practice has gone on for decades. However, with VAT applying to most work undertaken by plumbing and heating companies now being 20%, it appears that the enquiries about for cash payment (and the expected 20% cost-reduction) are on the increase. SNIPEF members report that clients for jobs of all sizes are now effectively asking them to break the law by working in the black economy on a more frequent basis than previously.

While this problem would be solved, in part, if a more sensible level of VAT was applied, there have been unsuccessful campaigns over many years which have failed to convince the UK Government of the economic sense of such an approach. The lobbying on this issue must continue and one day the penny may drop. In the meantime, legitimate companies working in our industry must not be tempted to secure work on the condition that they “ignore” the tax which they are legally obliged to collect and pass on to HMRC. The Scottish Building Federation’s recent campaign to highlight the problem of more and more work going to rogue traders (who are more than happy to work outside the law) was well timed and deserves the support of all legitimate companies working in the construction industry. The customers who insist on this tax-saving approach to construction work will, more than likely, get what they pay for and it is unlikely to be a professional job, done by qualified trades people backed up by the complaints and warranty arrangements offered by the industry trade associations, like SNIPEF.

June 2013

THERE IS ONLY ONE WAY TO FIND A TRULY REPUTABLE PLUMBING FIRM

When the Plumbing Industry Licensing Scheme was created over a decade ago under SNIPEF’s leadership, it was virtually unique as a tool

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for providing customers with details of qualified plumbers and reputable plumbing businesses. What a difference a few years can make.

It is hard to watch commercial TV these days without hearing that a programme has been sponsored by one or other of the new breed of organisations which suggest that they do what the Licensing Scheme was set up to do. The same organisations also place expensive adverts in the national press. Although they claim, just as the Licensing scheme claims, to give customers access to reputable traders, there are several notable differences. Firstly, many of the organisations do not check that the employees carrying out the work are qualified. It is a requirement of the Licensing Scheme that evidence is provided of the qualifications of the plumbers employed by a Licensed Business. Several of the new breed of schemes place considerable emphasis on customer feedback which at the very least could be said to be subjective. How many customers would know whether their plumbing work is safe and complies with Water and Building Regulations? When something goes wrong, what redress mechanisms and warranties are offered by these search facilities? Probably little or none in comparison with the extensive and independent facilities available to customers of Licensed Plumbing Businesses. Do customers contacting these agencies realise that their details can be sold to contractors looking for work? Contractors registering with such organisations will quickly find that the service may come to them at a price- significantly more than they would have to pay to be members of SNIFE and the Licensing Scheme. They might also be disappointed with the quality of leads provided.

It is not only customers of plumbing businesses which can benefit from using a licensed business. Exactly the same model is adopted within other parts of the Scottish construction industry under the banner of the Construction Licensing Executive which, as well as plumbers, covers builders, electricians, heating contractors, painters and decorators. It seems tragic that the goals of a not-for-profit organisation have been copied by organisations whose prime motive is making money. Judging from the extent of their advertising spend, this new model clearly pays.

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Unsuspecting members of the public might be tempted to use one of the organisations which they see on TV or read about in the press rather than the perfectly good methods of finding reliable traders established by the industry itself. SNIFE clearly has a role to play in promoting the benefits of the industry arrangements but it can never compete with enormous advertising budgets. Licensed businesses themselves can help by promoting the fact that they are licensed and explaining the significant benefits which licensing offers to their customers.

The launch of the national WaterSafe scheme later this year (which SNIFE Licensed Businesses will be part of) will have high profile publicity and this might help re-dress the balance. Let us hope that one day soon the penny will drop and the public will realise the difference between properly accredited licensed businesses and those which have paid to get on a register to find work.

May 2013

BELOW COST TENDERING BENEFITS NO ONE

When construction work is scarce there has always been a tendency for contractors to price low. Some contractors are willing to give up some profit as a means of keeping employees in work in the hope that the contract will either deliver profit through extras or that more profitable work will follow. On the face of things, keen pricing will usually be welcomed by clients who might look forward to their work being done at a price lower than they had anticipated.

There have been several significant construction industry business failures in recent months. One comment which is often made about these failed businesses is that they had been awarded large public sector contracts at prices which appeared to be below cost. It is simple economics that no business can operate on negative margins for any period of time- unless they can benefit from another source of income which can plug the gap on these loss-making projects. These business failures inevitably lead to pain- for the client who faces disruption to work

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and the cost of appointing a replacement contractor and for employees of the failed business who have lost their jobs. The greatest pain is often felt by sub-contractors who can be left high and dry through no fault of their own. It is hard to see any winners from such a scenario.

While public authorities are squeezed financially, this is no excuse for them awarding contracts when they must know that the tender price is below cost. Such behaviour seems both irresponsible and immoral. In looking for guilty parties in such cases, the client (who will almost always have the benefit of professional quantity surveying advice) must shoulder the lion's share of responsibility. While it would be simple enough to encourage contractors never to price below cost, in reality there will always be at least one who is desperate enough to do so. Action needs to start with clients.

A recent proposal being considered on public sector contracts in Northern Ireland might, at least in part, provide a solution to this issue. The suggestion that any tenders which were more than 15% below the average of all tenders submitted be automatically excluded from consideration would be a start. It would only really work if most tenderers priced appropriately. It would be good to see this idea being developed and implemented and followed in other areas of both the public and private sector. The sooner everyone realises that everything in life has a price attached to it, the better.

April 2013

PLUMBERS SHOULD BE PROUD OF THEIR PENSION SCHEME

When there are so many negative stories in newspapers about problems with occupational pension schemes, the Plumbing & Mechanical Services (UK) Pension Scheme has been bucking the trend and receiving considerable positive publicity in recent weeks.

Established in 1975, and still the only truly comprehensive occupational pension scheme in the UK construction industry, Plumbing Pensions has a long history of delivering quality pension provision to its 37,000

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members. As a defined benefit arrangement, the Scheme is required to undertake a formal actuarial valuation every three years to check that its assets are likely to meet its future liabilities. Ideally, such valuations will show that schemes are in balance (or even better have a surplus). In reality, very few defined benefit schemes have been in that position in recent years. The 2009 valuation of the Plumbing Scheme showed that it was fully funded and had a small surplus. The Directors of the Scheme recently received the preliminary results of its 2012 valuation and were pleased to note that not only did the Scheme continue to have a small surplus but it did so on a stronger basis than in 2009. This result, which was largely due to better than expected investment performance, resulted in the Scheme hitting the front page in one of the UK's respected pensions journals.

Although the Industry Pension Scheme has not traditionally entered into the many pensions industry awards schemes which exist, it was delighted to be advised recently that it has been nominated by Financial News for the prestigious award of "Pension Scheme of the Year". No application process was involved and the nomination came as a very pleasant surprise to the Scheme's Board of Directors and staff. Although the other 4 nominees are strong competition and include household names like the pension schemes for British Airways, Tesco and Santander, the very fact that the Scheme has been considered along with these much larger schemes is positive news.

The requirement for plumbing employers to enrol their employees in the Industry Pension Scheme (or an acceptable equivalent) is not always viewed positively by employers particularly when work is difficult and profit margins are squeezed. However, those who set up the Scheme almost 40 years ago had a vision that all plumbing employees and apprentices would be able to retire in the knowledge that they would receive a quality and meaningful pension. That vision remains and those in our industry who are participating in the Scheme should take pride that **their** pension scheme is regarded so highly in the wider pensions community. Those who are not in the Scheme (but will be required, by law, to automatically enrol all employees in an appropriate pension

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scheme within the next few years) should give serious consideration about getting involved in the only pension scheme which was designed specifically for the plumbing industry.

March 2013

SNIPEF MEMBERS HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO "FLY THE FLAG"

It is often said that members of the public don't know about SNIPEF, nor do they understand the value of using a SNIPEF member. In my experience, more members of the public are aware of our trade association than some people assume. I can recall several occasions over the years when someone has asked me what I do and my reply has been along the lines that I work for the plumbing trade association. "Do you mean SNIPEF?" has been the response to such a statement on more than one occasion.

SNIPEF takes every opportunity to advise potential customers of plumbing businesses about the unique and very valuable benefits which they will get if they contract with a SNIPEF member firm. In many ways the SNIPEF offering is extremely valuable to customers. What other approval scheme provides assurances that work will be carried out by properly qualified plumbers? What other scheme provides an independent complaints mechanism when things go wrong supported by a warranty at no extra cost to the customer? Over the last 30 years all sorts of media have been used to promote this message ranging from TV and radio advertising, press articles and adverts and, more recently social media including Facebook and Twitter. In the last year alone, SNIPEF has directed several thousand customers via its own [needaplumber](#) website to members websites. In reality, however, with limited resources, it is difficult to get its message across to every potential customer. It is even more difficult to change customer behaviour away from the view that "cheapest is best".

SNIPEF members often do not appreciate that they too have a role in promoting to the public that they are members of the recognised national

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trade association. Simple actions like showing the logo on vehicles and on stationery are not taken by large numbers of members who seem to prefer to remain anonymous or at least to keep the fact that they are members of SNIFE to themselves. Some members play their part at this and do so very well. I recently found myself behind a plumber's van at traffic lights and there, for all to see, in the corporate colours of the business concerned was the SNIFE logo along with another couple of logos. Alongside that van was another, which happened to be white in colour but had absolutely no indication about the identity of the firm. That van did display a logo showing that the firm in question was a member of a local authority "Trusted Trader" scheme but how customers were meant to know whose van was outside their house is anybody's guess.

Promotion of SNIFE membership is a two-way process and those members who play their part in this process are likely to be the ones which benefit most from their membership. Can YOUR customers tell at a glance that your firm has met the stringent requirements to become a SNIFE member (with all the potential benefits which that could bring)?

February 2013

TELL YOUR FRIENDS (AND CUSTOMERS) ABOUT WORLD PLUMBING DAY

Since the establishment of World Plumbing Day (11 March-everywhere-every year) back in 2010, I have gone into a number of primary schools to tell 8 and 9 year olds about the importance of water, health and **plumbing**. This presentation is not geared at recruiting plumbing apprentices in a few years' time. It is intended to show these young people that they should not take safe drinking water and sanitation for granted. My hope (and indeed the hope of other people doing the same presentation in schools all over the world) is that these young people will grow up to take their plumbing seriously (unlike so many other people in the developed world).

I recently went to a primary school not far from the SNIFE offices to deliver my presentation to two classes there. As on all previous

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occasions, the children were attentive and answered the many questions which I posed (“Where does water come from? What do we use water for?” etc). The presentations end with an invitation for the pupils to design a poster for this year’s World Plumbing Day (with prizes and certificates on offer for the best posters). I then invite the children to ask me any questions about what they have heard. One girl in Primary 3 asked me a question which I think sums up the purpose of the presentation-“Can we tell our friends about this?” “Please do” was my response “and tell them to tell **their** friends and families”.

Having an annual day to promote anything is not unusual. Those working in today’s plumbing industry should seize the opportunity which World Plumbing Day presents. What could **you** do to celebrate 11 March 2013? Who could **you** tell about the importance of plumbing to health? Just think of the benefits which could arise if people generally came to have a far better respect for the role which today’s plumbing industry plays. “Respect” is not a word which is often associated with plumbing but achieving respect should not be impossible.

If you need ideas on how to celebrate World Plumbing Day 2013, go to the special website- www.worldplumbingday.org

One of SNIFE’s staff has young twin relatives in one of the classes which I visited this week and it was really encouraging to be told afterwards that both of them had gone home that night and told their parents some of the things that the man who had been into their class told them about plumbing. SUCCESS!