



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE FOR
FINANCE AND PERSONNEL**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Electrical Standards in Building
Regulations**

26 May 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Jennifer McCann (Chairperson)
Mr David McNarry (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jonathan Craig
Dr Stephen Farry
Mr Simon Hamilton
Mr Fra McCann
Mr Adrian McQuillan
Ms Dawn Purvis

Witnesses:

Mr Derek Thompson) Northern Ireland Electrical Standards Lobbying Group
Mr Alfie Watterson)

The Chairperson (Ms J McCann):

I welcome Derek Thompson, chairman of the Electrical Standards Lobbying Group, and Alfie Watterson, the group's secretary. I invite you to make some opening remarks, after which I will open the session to members' questions.

Mr Derek Thompson (Northern Ireland Electrical Standards Lobbying Group):

Good morning, and thank you on behalf of our group. We are indebted to the Committee for the time and interest that you have given this matter to date. We are grateful for this important opportunity to present you with testimony about issues on which you may be willing and able to make a real difference.

The Northern Ireland Electrical Standards Lobbying Group consists of members who are drawn from the Electrical Training Trust, the Electrical Contractors' Association and the Joint Industry Board. The Electrical Training Trust is a training organisation comprising members who are drawn from the Unite union, independent electrical contractors and the Electrical Contractors' Association. The Joint Industry Board is a national UK wage and grading organisation for the industry.

We are speaking to the Committee on behalf of around 800 electrical installers. They comprise mostly small and medium-sized enterprises, although we can say confidently that we speak on behalf of the top 20 electrical contractors in Northern Ireland. We understand that around 5,000 practicing electricians operate in and from Northern Ireland and that the sector's combined turnover is around £400 million.

We will set out some problems and specify them for you. We are concerned about the latent, potential and actual risk of electrical accidents to householders and private business properties in the community and, of course, to your individual constituents. We are also concerned about the quality and standard of electrical installation work that is being carried out in the public sector.

Electricity is the mostly widely used type of energy in the world. It is used for work and leisure in the home and in the workplace. In the past, electricity provided mainly light and heat. However, over the years, the number of electrically powered items has increased hugely. That trend is set to continue and will inevitably bring about the need for alteration to existing wiring systems in your homes and mine. At present, there is no clear, effective or proactive means to protect the general public from poor electrical work.

Electricity is present in more than 700,000 homes in Northern Ireland. Many homeowners commission alterations and modifications to their existing wiring systems. However, the public have little or no way to determine who is competent to carry out work to the required standard. Reliance on shop windows and newspaper advertisements is, indeed, a risky business. We believe that the majority of minor work, alterations and modifications to domestic and agricultural electrical systems in the private sector are energised without proper inspection, testing or certification. We also believe that a significant minority of minor work in the public sector may also be energised without certification.

By contrast, natural gas is now present in more than 150,000 homes throughout Northern Ireland. Of course, the industry employs powerful Government support and regulation to protect consumers and their properties by ensuring that training, standards and qualifications are maintained. The Gas Safe Register ensures that all 120,000 gas fitters work to a legally enforceable standard of competency. Northern Ireland's building regulations are in place to govern the construction industry, yet they contain no reference to electrical installation standards.

We have obtained statistics from the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, which show that between 2005 and 2010, there were 674 incidents for which the cause cited was electrical supply at intake before socket. In plain English, that means wiring failure. It is reasonable to believe that the matter is greatly under-reported. There have also been 1,121 incidents that resulted from electrical appliances or other causes. Electrical accidents are under-reported. That is similar to most other accident types and categories. However, when an electrical accident happens, there is greater likelihood of its being catastrophic and involving loss of property and serious or fatal injury.

We estimate that there are around 800 electrical contracting organisations in Northern Ireland. Our research has revealed that around 125 of those organisations are not registered with any recognised certification body. Needless to say, none of the handymen, unqualified traders, cowboys or rogue traders is registered. The absence of registration with a recognised certification body must cause concern as it surely means that there are no guarantees, watchmen, gatekeepers, guardians or safety net for constituents and Northern Ireland's general public.

Such operators do not perform in accordance with regulations and do not carry out work to an acceptable standard. We see counterfeit, inferior cables, switch gear and accessories being used. Some of those materials will lie dormant for a number of years as they are expected to perform only under fault conditions. When they are needed most, they will fail. Those materials appear with and without British Standard (BS) and Conformité Européenne (CE) markings. That undermines the work of bone fide contractors. Rogue traders are able to offer artificially low prices to unwary people. In doing so, they compromise on safety and cut corners on standards. Cutting corners to cut costs can cost lives. We need to crack down on those cowboys.

Currently, there is no method available by which the general public or the Department can

check the competency, qualification or certification status of those who practise electrical installation work. It seems incredible to some that sandwich makers, doormen and wheel clampers need to be registered, but that those who undertake complex electrical work in our homes, schools and places of work do not need to be registered. There is nothing to stop anyone in this room from putting an advertisement in the 'Andersonstown News' or the 'Newtownards Chronicle' providing a mobile telephone number from a disposable pay-as-you-go phone saying that they can wire your house or office at competitive rates. I would like you to think about that.

How is that relevant to your Department? We contend that there are major implications for consumers in the domestic marketplace and significant health and safety considerations to be taken into account. Of course, there is also an impact on Government procurement and on building control. A significant and real implication is making its way to the surface. As things stand, there is a growing tendency for prequalified, approved and appointed electrical subcontractors to sub-let work to other electrical installers. That often cascades into multiple sub-letting of their work, often down to the low bidder. You will not be surprised to learn that one of the main reasons why they are low is to do with money. The domestic form of procurement has exposed the building services sector to the flagrancy of Dutch auctions, horse trading and sub-economic bidding. Most of the locals have been battered and bartered into poor shape, so they are passing the pain down the line, and cutting corners comes to pass, which is really no surprise.

Approximately 70 out of the 800 electrical companies are responsible for about 70% of the turnover in Northern Ireland, and the majority of work undertaken is in the public sector. Under current procurement arrangements, there is nothing to stop a contractor from subcontracting electrical work to a non-registered electrical contractor. That has major implications for the quality, work, health and safety, not to mention value for money.

You may have read a little bit about the red book, or the regulations. It is the electricians' bible, and it is the foundation document that guides electrical installation work in the United Kingdom. The red book sets out guidelines, but that is not enough. There is no systematic enforcement of the regulations, and the culture and values are stifled by weaknesses in the public and private procurement system. The book is a two-dimensional tool. It informs, guides and instructs, and it does that very well, but, unlike the maximum speed laws in our country, it lacks the vital third dimension, which is enforcement.

It is easy and convenient for some to say that the issue is not new and that it was covered years ago in a mountain of documents. However, the stark reality is that the red book, or the seventeenth edition of the regulations, as it is known, comprises about 380 pages and costs about £70, but cowboys, rogue traders and those who lack competence will not have bought it, let alone read it, and will not feel obliged to comply with it.

It is not often that industry approaches government and the democratic institutions to ask for regulation of the marketplace. However, we need enforcement before property and lives are lost. Those who are spending public money also need to be sure that those carrying out the work, whether appointed directly or indirectly by the government, are competent, and they also need to know that they are getting quality jobs and value for money.

I say this respectfully, but we appreciate that there may be an attempt by some in DFP to say that the issue falls under the remit of DETI or the DOE. However, for the record, when we first embarked on this course of action, we sent an initial briefing to Mr Wilson as Minister of the Environment, and he swiftly directed us to DFP. We are engaging with other Departments, Committees and agencies, and we are planning to meet with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the ETI Committee at some point in the future. We have also engaged with the Health and Safety Executive, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service and the Consumer Council, who have expressed a genuine interest and understanding of our position.

Therefore, we need to come to a solution. An effective regulatory model already exists in Scotland, which demonstrates how government and industry can work together to secure health and safety training and the sector's credibility. Using that model, referred to as the Certification of Construction Scheme 2004, the Northern Ireland Executive could implement electrical standards for the public sector, the private sector and domestic clients as part of the Northern Ireland building regulations. Such a model will ensure that only fully qualified electricians and those deemed competent will sign off electrical installation work in all environments. It will also place the emphasis on the acquisition of industry-recognised skills and qualifications.

My colleague will speak about the response document — the DFP's rebuttal of the SELECT document.

Mr Alfie Patterson (Northern Ireland Electrical Standards Lobbying Group):

The document was sourced by the Committee for Finance and Personnel in response to our original paper and contained unfavourable remarks about the Scottish model. That was contrary to what we had been led to believe in various meetings with SELECT, the owner of the scheme in Scotland.

We met SELECT's chief executive, Newell McGuinness, to put to him the points that were raised in the DFP paper. He provided a written response. He also stated briefly that it was a use of statistics, and that what was said by DFP was not incorrect, but that it must be remembered that the scheme was initially launched on a greenfield site in 2004. He pointed out that it takes time to grow a scheme, develop it, and get people to accept and deliver it, which is the stage that SELECT has reached. Some of the statistics used may have been on the low side and were taken from SELECT documentation, but when the figures, and how they relate to what is happening in building control in Scotland, were investigated, they did not paint a true picture.

To support the scheme, the paper states that certifiers in Scotland are now permitted to use a Government-approved logo to promote certification of their status. So, the scheme is fully supported by, and has full commitment from, the Scottish Government. Interestingly, Scotland's Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change, Stewart Stevenson, said:

“The launch of this certification mark is an innovative step forward. The use of a single identity for all scheme members will generate respect and trust between clients and building professionals. Its use will provide reassurance to the public, boost competence and high standards in Scotland's building industry, and further demonstrate the government's commitment to the construction of sustainable and safer buildings.”

It is also worth noting that our original paper about other areas of the United Kingdom explained that England and Wales have a purely domestic scheme. However, contrary to what the DFP states in its response, that scheme is not mandatory. The scheme in Scotland is also not mandatory, but at least Scotland has a scheme. England, Scotland and Wales, like Northern Ireland, have what Derek Thompson called the red book, the BS 7671; however, that is not being policed or enforced here. Derek said, quite rightly, that anybody in this room could rewire a house by following manuals provided by B&Q or Homebase.

England, Scotland and Wales have recognised the need for some form of enforcement. We say that the domestic Part P route, which is in England and Wales, is not the ideal model. There

are a lot of gaps and faults in the management of that scheme. The Scottish model is more inclusive and takes the private, public and domestic sectors into consideration. We believe that that scheme best suits Northern Ireland.

In the past four to six weeks, the Commission for Energy Regulation in Dublin has announced the Safe Electric scheme. Therefore, Northern Ireland is now the only part of the British Isles that does not have a scheme in place to monitor or enforce electrical installations. DFP also states that sufficient legislation is in place through the Electricity at Work Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1991. However, statistics produced by the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service show that in the past five years, 674 fires have been the direct result of wiring. If, under the Electricity at Work Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1991, adequate legislation is in place, why has there not been a single case investigated? Why has no one been found to be at fault and brought to justice through the courts? That has not happened. The Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland has no statistics or evidence of cases being brought to court.

It is being put to us repeatedly that under existing legislation there are systems in place to monitor and protect the consumer. We say that those are not working adequately at this time, and we are trying to deliver a scheme for the industry that will benefit your constituents. The proposed scheme will not take away from anybody who is working in the sector and is not intended to eliminate jobs. We are trying to build a successful private and public sector and build in safeguards that should have been in place long ago. We believe that the Assembly should address the situation and adopt the recommendations that Derek described.

Mr Thompson:

In case you think that this is going on for ever, I expect to speak for a further five minutes.

Our group is disturbed and disappointed by a comment in DFP's rebuttal:

“Statistics from the NI Fire and Rescue Service and from the NI Health and Safety Executive relating to fires and accidents arising from fixed wiring installations indicate that the number of incidents is very low in relation to the number of installations, and the number of fatalities and casualties is also low.”

Why would someone write such a thing? What is acceptable? Even one death or one serious injury must be something for us to think about.

I shall explain some of the benefits of what we are proposing. Regulation combined with licensing would improve standards and quality for government, business and domestic consumers. Across the world, most democratic and industrial countries such as Canada, America and quite a few of the large European countries, including Germany, England and Scotland, are improving the standards of building services through regulation and licensing: we are not. We need to do something about that.

Regulation and licensing would also reward and recognise businesses that are committed to improvement. It would differentiate between good and bad service providers, which is something that everyone in this room would like to know. It would stem the growing trend for poor workmanship. It would reduce or eliminate electrical fires, and it would invigorate sustainable and competitive trading. It would provide consumers with access and accountability, and it would encourage best practice.

I shall sum up with some conclusions. Alongside an enhanced regulatory framework, our group, on behalf of the local industry, is calling for the introduction of an accredited and publicly available register for all electrical contractors and electricians to allow consumers to establish the competency and qualifications of individual operatives. We welcome the Committee's interest and the support that some members have provided. We also welcome the findings of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee report, which acknowledged that, on this issue, Northern Ireland lags behind the rest of the UK and the island of Ireland.

We believe that we are taking proactive steps and a proactive approach on the issue, and it is noteworthy that it is the industry that is calling for tougher enforcement and regulation. We are here because we do not want to have to raise the issue on the back of a tragedy. In the past five years, as Alfie Watterson and I have said, there have been 674 incidents. We have not had an opportunity to look at all of them, but the number speaks for itself. One death is one too many.

Following the establishment of the Gas Safe Register in Northern Ireland, the Commission for Energy Regulation's Safe Electric campaign in the Republic of Ireland has informed the general public there about the need to check the bona fides, credentials and qualifications of gas and electrical workers to see that they are qualified to work on electrical systems. We need to do something similar here. There are too many cowboys. As a result of the desperation that recession often causes, people are emerging as multi-skilled handymen and taking on complex

alterations to wiring systems in domestic and private business establishments. We know that the legislative process can be long and drawn out. Although our ultimate objective is to have legislation in place, we believe that steps can be taken in the meantime to help to address the issue. What are those steps?

We recognise that you have a sizeable workload and that understanding the complexities of the arguments for legislation is difficult and challenging. We propose that the Committee gives its full support and endorsement to an industry-led solution. We propose that the Committee approves and makes use of a licensing system for electricians. Our proposal is that the system would require the registration of all electricians in Northern Ireland and that that information would be accessible and available through a public website. The system would be run and managed as a charitable trust, would be low-cost and would be publicly and officially endorsed by DFP. A system similar to that has been adopted in Scotland. The Scottish First Minister has consented to the national flag of Scotland being used as part of a quality licensing system for Scottish electricians.

The Northern Ireland Electrical Standards Lobbying Group, together with key stakeholders, is looking at the development of a central and approved register for qualified contractors that allows them to sign up to an agreed code of conduct that reflects the best practice that the industry can offer. We seek the support of the Committee, the Department, the Assembly and wider government agencies in our endeavours to ensure that the public are informed and protected from cowboys and rogue traders.

We will ask DETI, the Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland (HSENI), the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the Consumer Council, Building Control and others to consider joining a public information campaign. It is only by raising the public's awareness that we can ensure that only qualified and registered professionals are allowed to work and that those operating outside the system comply for the betterment and safety of everyone.

That is a work in progress. In the steps on the road to our ultimate objective, we would welcome the opportunity to keep the Committee informed about the proposal and to make further presentations, in the not too distant future, to the Committee on that issue alone. That is all that we wish to say at this stage. We are open to members' questions.

The Chairperson:

Thank you. That was a comprehensive and detailed report. I know that a couple of members wish to ask questions, and I am sure that others do too.

Ms Purvis:

Thank you for your presentation. Safety standards are a concern for all of us and, particularly, for the industry. Why can the Joint Industry Board (JIB) not do the job that you propose?

Mr Thompson:

The Joint Industry Board, whose chief executive supports the initiative, is geared towards the setting of wages and the grading of electricians, not towards the central registration of electricians for the purpose of licensing or regulation. The JIB has pointed us towards a local regional solution; that came from the chief executive.

Ms Purvis:

The JIB has said that that is not its job, but could it become its job?

Mr Thompson:

The JIB would say that that should be the job of our community here. It is a private organisation that works on behalf of the industry to set wages and to determine grades, not to license electricians. The answer to your question is that the JIB does not view that as its job. It believes that that is the job of the local industry in Northern Ireland. The same applies in Scotland.

Ms Purvis:

The JIB provides a skills card, which basically states that an electrician is qualified to a certain standard. That card also certifies an electrician's health and safety accreditation. Why, therefore, can a regional JIB not look at the issues of licensing and accreditation?

Mr Thompson:

The JIB has not indicated that in the discussions that we have had in Northern Ireland, England, Wales or Scotland. It has looked for countrywide solutions. Licensing and accreditation are not part of its mandate or constitution.

Mr Watterson:

The Government at Westminster were aware of the electrotechnical certification scheme and the ECS card, which is referred to as the JIB card. However, they did not consider that to be the appropriate licensing model for the domestic consumer in England and Wales, and they introduced the domestic Part P to the building regulations. Scotland has the Scottish JIB, which is part of the national JIB, and the JIB card exists there. Again, the Scottish Parliament decided that that was not the way forward. Derek was quite right when he described what the JIB is about. In Northern Ireland, we are looking for an independent solution that the JIB can be part of and supportive of. However, that needs to go a step further and recognise the JIB card. There needs to be Government support and backing, similar to that provided by the Scottish Parliament and Westminster.

Mr Thompson:

The JIB will not necessarily filter out cowboys and rogue traders. The organisation recognises those who are competent and proactively offer themselves for grading and alignment with the national wage determination. In Northern Ireland, we do not have a culture of people leaning towards the JIB. Roughly, only 27% of the annual cohort of electricians is registered with the JIB here. In England, the rate is much higher — it is probably above 70% or 80% — because of the culture and the perception and values of the JIB there.

Ms Purvis:

Is that not an issue for the JIB and the industry?

Mr Thompson:

Yes, it is an issue for the JIB. However, it has been looking at the matter only in respect of its mandate, which is grading and wage setting.

Mr Watterson:

What we are trying not to do here is to remove any existing contractor from the industry. We are trying to develop a level playing field and a minimum entry level that all existing contractors can achieve. However, not all those contractors would be JIB-registered, and they may not be able to obtain a JIB card because they do not have the history from apprenticeship through to the various skills levels. Looking at having a JIB card only could eliminate a lot of the current contractors in the industry, and we do not want to do that.

Ms Purvis:

That is an issue for the JIB and the industry, rather than Government, to address. Any form of regulation will not completely do away with rogue traders and cowboys in the industry.

Mr Thompson:

That is correct.

Ms Purvis:

Any regulation has a cost implication in terms of policing that regulation. Have you done any calculations of what it would cost to police the regulation of the industry? Obviously, the Department would have to consider cost in accepting any amendments to the building regulations.

Mr Thompson:

I will make a stab at answering that. We are asking the Committee to think about two things today. One is support for a phase one approach, whereby you could support the industry here, through a local solution, to work towards regulation but, in the interim, endorse a brand and a system and allow us time to look collectively into the issues of regulation and the implications that that would have for the Department.

In Scotland, the cost for licensing is, typically, about £1 a week for contractors who subscribe to the scheme. I do not know what it would cost government to set up a system to manage certification. IT systems and solutions exist to record, to file and to pass on certification electronically. However, I cannot answer your question; we are not that far down the road.

Mr F McCann:

Who would you envisage being the main people to police any new legislation on accreditation? Would it be building control located in local government or in the Assembly?

Mr Watterson:

We envisage it being similar to the SELECT model in Scotland, where the scheme has been set up and is managed by the SELECT group there. Locally, we envisage it happening in two phases.

First, there is the voluntary-led phase, which gets the scheme up and running. That would be managed by a charitable trust. The reason we want Government support for that is to raise awareness. We could start up a voluntary registration scheme tomorrow, but where would it go? The profile and support of the Government here are needed to endorse it. That is what has made the Scottish scheme so successful, and it is even more successful now that the Scottish Government have attached a logo to it. It is about raising awareness.

I go back to the points raised earlier about registration: how it will work, how much it will cost, how we get people to register, and so on. This is not something that will happen overnight. It is about raising awareness and making the public aware of the scheme. It is about making the domestic consumer — members' constituents — aware that there is a register that they can consult, by using a free-phone number or going on the Internet, to source an electrician, whom they can be confident will be able to complete work to the standards required.

At the moment, there is a massive void in the domestic sector, and members' constituents are put at risk every day of the week. People often source an electrician by word of mouth. Someone may be looking for an electrician to rewire their house, and a neighbour recommends the chap who fixed their electric cooker. Before you know it, the chap who fixed the electric cooker is doing a full house rewire. The danger to the consumer is not immediate. It could take three, four or five years for faults to occur because the proper quality of wiring was not used, the wrong components were fitted or the skills of the person who did the job were lacking. That is why we want Government support for an awareness campaign that demonstrates to the public the dangers inherent in electrical installation.

We are aware that the explosions that happen with gas do not happen with electricity, and there is not the same potential for carbon monoxide poisoning. The Gas Safe Register was launched because the public and the Government are concerned about the potential dangers and hazards of gas. If there is a gas explosion, news cameras will be there. If a house is incorrectly rewired, no one is interested. However, over the past five years, that has led to 674 fires that the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service has had to attend. That is not a small number. The DFP paper states that the level of accidents and fatalities is low and sustainable. As Derek said, how many fatalities do we need before we look at rectifying the current position?

Mr F McCann:

That is a valid point. How many fires, deaths or injuries are needed before people sit up and take notice? The fact that there have been 674 fires of that type highlights the need for a system of accreditation that allows us to distinguish tradespeople from people who are bluffing their way.

Earlier, you said that you would like to see identified those who are fully qualified or deemed competent. What do you mean by “deemed competent”?

Mr Thompson:

There is a legal definition of competency. The regulations refer to a person being qualified and having suitable experience. That experience is determined on the basis of a professional assessment. In Northern Ireland, we are good at producing qualified and competent people. The funding and training here have been exemplary in the past five years, and we have produced around 2,000 very good, world-class electricians. In terms of public money, that is substantially more per capita than is the case in England and Wales, so we have been very successful. Competency is a combination of a technical qualification and an assessment of capability.

Mr F McCann:

Certainly, I see a difference between those who are qualified and those who are competent. If someone says that they are competent, it does not lead me to believe that they are fully qualified to deliver the service. They may fit into the category of people who see themselves as being competent without being fully qualified.

Mr Thompson:

I appreciate your point. The term is valid in technical terms, but there may be an issue with the public perception of the term “competent”.

What we see emerging in England are short-form electrical courses to become an electrician in six weeks. Some people here have tried — unsuccessfully — to charge £3,000 and £5,000 for a six-week course to become an electrician, which is the way in which it is billed and sold. Those who take the course end up with a technical qualification. It is an academic course on which people study, learn, fill in a form, do a questionnaire, sit an exam and obtain a technical qualification. It is akin to doing the theory aspect of the driving test and not being able to set foot in a car. We alert the Committee to the growing trend for that. It is borne out of the recession

and people becoming desperate. We are not exclusive; we would rather include everyone, such as the small entrepreneur who is trying to become something and to make his way into the industry. However, we want to include them on the basis of safety, qualification and competency.

Mr F McCann:

Obviously, that has been a problem for many years. Why is it only coming to the fore now?

Mr Watterson:

It is like everything: there are more problems out there that may only be addressed in five or 10 years' time. The fact that we now have a local devolved Government gives us the opportunity to bring the issue to the table. Prior to the devolved Government, we had really been forgotten about by Westminster. Part P was introduced many years ago. That was never going to happen in Northern Ireland. A separate Bill was needed to bring that into Northern Ireland building regulations, and that was not going to happen. Now that we have a devolved Government and local people with power, it is an opportunity for the Government here to have a success. We are trying to deliver that to the industry.

It goes beyond just the registration and certification of contractors. It is about securing work in the industry, making the industry a better place for everybody to work in and rewarding contractors and companies that pay their taxes, train apprentices and support the industry. It is to reward those who carry out the work, pay public liability insurance and employers' liability insurance and pay for the training of apprentices and staff. It is about having a minimum standard in the industry and saying that that is what companies and contractors have to meet, so they should forget about their £50 adverts in local weekly papers that tout for work when they do not have any registration. It will cost them less to come into the scheme and be registered, and it will give confidence to the public sector, the private sector and, particularly, the domestic sector.

Mr Thompson:

The world has changed. Ten years ago, most of us plugged in three or four things in our house, such as a toaster, a TV and a microwave. If you look around a house now, how many things are being plugged in? The demand and utilisation of electrical appliances in the home has risen dramatically. That has led to alterations and modifications taking place in homes, such as the addition of electric showers, extra sockets and a whole range of new lighting schemes and low-

voltage spotlights. All those things have brought about significant changes to what our homes look like compared with 10 years ago. We are spotting some of those things now in how people go about their work.

Mr McQuillan:

I am sorry for missing the first part of your presentation, gentlemen. Surely there is a difference between wiring an electric cooker and wiring a house for somebody. I could wire in an electric cooker, but, if I were to wire a house for somebody, I would have to have a certificate in order for the power company to supply power to that house when the work was completed. Are you not creating a cartel? A small electrician, who goes around in his van, is perhaps 55 years old and has served his time in the job for five or six years, may not have a formal qualification but could be every bit as good a spark as the guys who come out now with qualifications.

Mr Thompson:

He will not be every bit as good a spark. We have written twice to approximately 1,000 people on the issue of the scheme, and there has not been one voice of dissent. We are interested in the small people, because they make up the bulk of our little community here. We have only 20 big players, and they are fading fast because of the recession. Whatever happens here must be inclusive. We know and understand that, and we will take dramatic steps to ensure that it happens. The sort of person you referred to can come to train, to get a qualification and to demonstrate his ability to carry out, inspect and test work correctly. We are more interested in that happening than in being sympathetic to the DIY'er who cleans footpaths, clears guttering and does a bit of electrical work as well.

Cookers kill people. In 2004, the daughter of Dr Tonge, who was a Liberal Democrat MP, was electrocuted to death in an accident involving a dishwasher. The person who installed the electrical system for that dishwasher was a multi-skilled handyperson. The police were involved and that person was prosecuted. The simple failure was that instead of the cable conductor being installed one way, it had been put in the other way because it was quicker, used less cable and was more convenient. As a result of the conductor being in that position, someone thought that it was safe to drill a hole and to put in a screw. Six months later, the unfortunate daughter of the MP opened the dishwasher with wet hands and was electrocuted to death. That is the concern for us, and I would not like to have to come before the Committee again to plead my case on the basis of an accident caused by the sort of person you described.

Mr McQuillan:

I agree with what you are trying to do, but I also want to ensure that there is a role for people of that age group who work day and daily as electricians and are not simply handymen.

Mr Thompson:

There is definitely a role for those people. I come from a training background and have 35 years of experience in the industry. I have a passion for what we do and a passion for assessment, professionalism and qualifications in the industry. The 55-year-old man is very welcome. Every week, I see men from that age group come forward in the training environment and recognise that they do not know enough.

Mr McQuillan:

Is it not very hard to get a man of that age to go back into training?

Mr Thompson:

Sometimes, but we encourage them.

Mr McQuillan:

How do you do that?

Mr Thompson:

We talk to people. We go to see them. Please feel free to visit us to see what we do, Adrian.

Mr McQuillan:

Do you encourage them or beat them with a big stick?

Mr Thompson:

Truthfully, it is a bit of both. We have got to do exactly what government does, and they also use a big stick at times when it comes to education. They constantly raise the bar and that is what we are doing. If you compare what we are doing in Northern Ireland with what is happening in American, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Germany, France, Scotland and England, we are dealing with the mundane in trying to address the barriers against what we want to do. As a group here, we are a little frustrated and are trying to think how we can get across a very technical

yet very important message. This issue affects 700,000 homes in Northern Ireland, and it also affects farming businesses, schools and hospitals. I am confident that I can stand over much of what I have said today.

Mr McNarry:

I apologise, as Adrian did, for missing your initial presentation. Please tell me if I ask you something that has been dealt with, and I will pick it up in the Hansard report of the meeting. Your message sounds good.

I have a question about apprenticeships. We would all encourage people to get on the job trail and to get into work. Does the need to train apprentices and the insurance costs associated with that contribute to employers' reluctance to take on apprentices and thereby increase their workloads and overheads?

I also have a question about the National House-Building Council (NHBC) 10-year certificate. Is your industry covered in that? Does the certificate cover wiring and so on?

Mr Thompson:

No. The answer to that question is straightforward.

Mr McNarry:

It is not covered by the NHBC?

Mr Watterson:

The National House-Building Council is concerned with the construction of properties, not the internal fittings such as wiring.

Mr McNarry:

I understand that. The fact that many of the allied trades and specialist subcontractors are not included in the NHBC certificate is detrimental to their importance. The reason why someone pays for the certificate and might need to use it could be to cover a fault made by the trade that you represent. You might care to look at that from a representation point of view. If you are not recognised, people dismiss you.

Mr Watterson:

That is a very valid point. The builder has the certificate; he flies the badge of the NHBC. He brings in electricians and other specialists to complete the house. We will not go into the matter too deeply now, but the builder, who has the NHBC badge that says that his building has been constructed to the proper standards, can cut costs by bringing in unqualified electricians to complete the wiring. That is a point that we have been trying to make. The consumer is exposed because, although the building has an NHBC certificate, there is nothing to confirm that the wiring has been done to the proper standards.

Mr McNarry:

The certificate is not free of charge. It has to be paid for.

Mr Watterson:

Yes.

Mr McNarry:

The consumer pays for it. The builder can do lots of things, and the NHBC certificate provides a certain element of protection. The fact that your trade is not covered by that certificate seems to diminish the status of your contribution to the finished building. That affects people's perceptions, which are a devil. I knew that the certificate did not cover certain trades, and it irks me that it does not.

Mr Watterson:

That is a fair comment.

Mr Thompson:

I will make a general comment about training. Employer-led training is declining. In 2007, we had 400 people going into paid employment from day one. In 2008, that figure had dropped to 204, and, in 2009, it had dropped to 133. It is wrong to say that all those people were young people, because the Assembly saw fit to remove the upper age limit from 2008 onwards. The apprenticeship is in decline, as is training. The lack of work due to the recession is probably the major reason for that decline. However, there are other factors involved.

Insurance has not been a significant issue in electrical contracting. We have had a very strong

culture of employment since 1997. The industry has bought into the belief, the values and the system of employing young people directly, not through schemes or training programmes but, since 1997, by taking them on so that they pay income tax as they earn. Insurance has not been a major obstacle to the significant majority of electrical contractors — even the small practitioners expect to do that. It may hinder a minority of people who are thinking about taking a chance and breaking out on their own, and they will not engage an apprentice for that very reason. Those people normally have problems other than insurance: it may be that they cannot consistently offer the young person sufficient evidence or training. Wearing my other hat, I might not be so keen on those contractors taking on young people for all sorts of reasons.

Mr McNarry:

If there is a decline in the number of apprentices, where will the electricians of the future come from?

Mr Thompson:

That is a very good question. We have been taking that up with other Committees —

Mr McNarry:

I need you to answer that question. Where will they come from?

Mr Thompson:

Apprentice electricians in this country are born out of demand. When demand has slowed, the ability of employers to survive, trade and offer real workplace training stalls as well.

Mr McNarry:

How long does it take to train an apprentice?

Mr Thompson:

It takes around four years.

Mr McNarry:

Our job is to build and push up the economy. If there were an upsurge, will you reach a stage where you cannot cope? Will you reach the stage where you will not have enough members?

Mr Thompson:

We will probably reach that stage in around three years' time. We will have significant problems if we do not have the confidence or funding, and if the industry cannot recover. My reading of the situation is that at the moment, we probably have sufficient cohort in place. We have been training people to work in Northern Ireland and from Northern Ireland. We have had people working in Dublin who are now coming back. That is replenishing a bit of a gap. We have also had people working in England and Scotland, and some of those people are coming back. That has a slight effect on recruitment activity.

Mr McNarry:

To clarify; do you reckon that, in three years' time, we will have a problem having sufficient electricians to deal with the work that would be on the ground for them?

Mr Thompson:

We may have a problem. This is crystal ball stuff. We have looked at labour market intelligence and at data from Oxford Economics to try and foresee what will happen. Those organisations point to a modest growth — no spikes; no big hockey stick growth rate — of 1%, 2% or 3% in the labour market over the next three years. We are thoughtful about that as a training organisation and as a sector. We are thinking proactively and intelligently about that. However, things being as they are at the moment, we have got to live with the reality of the situation.

I want to encourage the Committee to think about licensing and how that will affect the training agenda. Rogue traders do not train apprentices, and they never will. They do not think about employers' liability insurance, and they never will. If we do not put reasonable legislative controls in place, rogue traders will stifle the bona fide contractor who might otherwise take on an apprentice.

When the public, or you folks here, need an electrician, how does that happen? It would be interesting to take a poll to see how someone would go about finding an electrician, and whether it is case of who knows who. If one does not consciously recruit or employ the services of a bona fide, licensed, insured electrician from a public service or a private procurement perspective, then one is feeding the cowboys and rogue traders who simply displace the proper training of apprentice electricians. We see evidence of that.

Mr McNarry:

I commend your attitude. It is very refreshing. Many other tradesmen and subcontractors have disposed of apprenticeships due to the need to survive. They have casual labourers, but have disposed of apprenticeships. I think that your attitude is highly commendable.

The Chairperson:

Health and safety are the main issues of concern to most people in this matter. The Department has provided a very detailed response to your paper. Looking at that response, and at some of the other information in front of me, there does not seem to be one statutory organisation that is responsible in this area: there almost seems to be a mishmash of different regulations. One regulation would provide one standard.

What is the main source of resistance? Is it financial? Does the Department believe that the existing legislation is sufficient? Further to what Dawn said; who would police a new system?

There will always be people who cannot afford to employ a bone fide electrician to carry out small tasks in their homes, and to me this issue is about creating awareness among people about the dangers involved. If a person puts a small advert in a newspaper, they will not be asked for accreditations or certificates. Therefore, how do we raise awareness of the dangers among the general public and let them know that they are putting their lives in danger and their homes at risk of fire. In the past five years, 674 fires have been caused by electrical faults, which is a high number. Has your organisation looked at raising awareness?

Mr Watterson:

We have the perfect model for improving public perception, and it is the Gas Safe Register. If one were to knock on someone's door and ask them about gas, one will find that the awareness campaign about gas was immense — Governments and Ministers backed it. There is nobody in Northern Ireland who is unaware of the Gas Safe Register.

Prior to the introduction of the Gas Safe Register, CORGI was the national gas registration body. Northern Ireland held on to CORGI for a year longer than England and Wales, after which the Gas Safe Register was brought in here. That register is a model that the electrical industry can use.

You are quite right; the main issue is public awareness and making the public aware of the inherent dangers of faulty wiring and plug and socket abuse. We were asked earlier why we need government involvement. We need the government to put information into the public domain and make people aware of the dangers. As an industry, we can provide the information, but if we do not have government support, anything that we say will fall on deaf ears. If we do not receive government backing, then in 10 or 15 years the electrical industry will be in the same place as it is today, or further down the ladder.

The gas industry has established itself, and we mentioned the reasons earlier; the chances of explosions and carbon monoxide poisoning, which may attract higher news intensity than the results of electrical failure. However, the Chamber in this Building was destroyed by a fire due to an electrical fault some 20 or 25 years ago. Therefore, we are sitting in a place that suffered from electrical faults that caused severe damage and cost to the country as a whole.

Mr McQuillan:

Although it was certainly dreadful, it was not caused by a cowboy builder. This place was built by one of the best builders in the country.

Mr Watterson:

You said builder.

Mr McQuillan:

I meant electrician.

Mr Watterson:

We need government support for an awareness scheme, because although it may not reach the level of the gas campaign, it will make the public aware.

The Chairperson:

What is your view on resistance?

Mr Thompson:

Are you talking about a individual's resistance to using a qualified person?

The Chairperson:

No; I am talking about resistance from DFP, which has provided a comprehensive response to your submission.

Mr Thompson:

With respect, some of that response used a lot of Google and anecdotal material. I feel that one of the issues in the response coloured the whole paper. It stated that the number of casualties and deaths was low. That was a poor comment to include, and it coloured my view of how the rest of the document was written. I said that we were disturbed and disappointed by the rebuttal, and I will read it to you again so that you know exactly the point that I am trying to make.

“Statistics from the NI Fire and Rescue Service and from the NI Health and Safety Executive relating to fires and accidents arising from fixed wiring installations indicate that the number of incidents is very low in relation to the number of installations, and the number of fatalities and casualties is also low.”

How and why did that statement appear in the report?

The Chairperson:

I am trying to tease out whether you feel that the existing level of quality control and inspection in local council building control is adequate.

Mr Thompson:

It is not adequate, and it has a narrow focus. For instance, the wiring required for this Building is quite complex. The industry, the technology and the materials being used now, and how we go about the work, have moved on dramatically and continue to do so. However, the system that examines all of this has not moved on, and we are stuck with it. That system just has to catch up a little bit. All that we are trying to do, as a small group of people, is to shed a bit of light on the matter. The industry is coming to you to ask you to join us. We are willing to meet you half way. We will come up with ideas about how to promote safety, and there is a big prize to be gained.

I respect all the objections that I have heard. However, if those few objections were put on a scale alongside the international benefits that could be brought to our little society, the benefits would far outweigh the objections. I urge you to engage with us; think about a phase one introduction sooner rather than later; and work towards legislation. As you folks become

convinced and assured by the evidence and statistics, by all the potential benefits of training and by not wanting the small man to be left out, I am confident that you will be glad that you listened to our advice and acted on it. We are stuck in Northern Ireland mode. We need to think about what other democratic industrial companies are doing across Europe and the world and get out of our Northern Ireland thinking.

Mr Watterson:

At the outset, we mentioned the red book and the BS 7671 standard that has been introduced in England, Wales and Scotland. There is also a version used in the South of Ireland. Why have they introduced additional schemes? Why did they feel that that was necessary to do so, while we are still using the same book? Within the last four weeks, the Commission for Energy Regulation in Dublin announced a Safe Electric scheme. We have been campaigning for such a scheme for 18 months — and then, all of a sudden, one is introduced in the South. We are now the only part of the British Isles that is exposed.

Mr McNarry:

One can recollect tragedies and deaths in all the places that you mentioned and in the Isle of Man too. Heaven forbid that something like that has to happen here. Are you saying that schemes have been introduced in those countries because of those tragedies? I do not like to see Northern Ireland being behind in anything, and I cannot understand why we are behind in this matter.

Mr Watterson:

We suffered by not having a devolved Administration. Scotland introduced a certification scheme when it got its devolved Administration. We used the Scottish scheme as the basis for our model. We looked at all the models in existence in the UK and identified the Scottish one as being the most comprehensive as it covered the public, private and domestic sector. The Westminster Government have brought in various ad hoc schemes such as TrustMark and half a dozen others, the names of which pass me by at the moment. All of those schemes have failed unfortunately, and, although I do not think that Part P will go the same way as some of the others, it has a lot of failings.

The domestic market is a big concern to us, and to you, as you want to safeguard your constituents, but we believe that this is about more than just the domestic market. There is a lot of synergy between Scotland and Northern Ireland. They look at each other's policies, ways of

working, and modes of operation, and we believe that the Scottish model is the one that we are seeking.

Mr Thompson:

This is not about just one issue. Licensing and regulation are about health and safety and fatalities: and there are some records in Northern Ireland of fatalities and injuries, including severe injuries such as loss of limbs and the ability to do things. Therefore, this is more than just words. It is also about training and quality, and trying to raise ourselves to world-class standards. It is also about value for money: it can cost the little old lady a few pounds to bring in a good contractor, but it can cost a lot more to bring in a bad one.

Mr McNarry:

Before you go, could you tell us how many Shinnars it takes to change a lightbulb?

The Chairperson:

David, there is no call for that. Thank you for your presentation. We will take on board what you have said.