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HAZARDS OF A SKILLS CLASH

In an era of chronic skills shortages, the rejection of the CITB's apprentice training levy could have far-reaching implications for the future health of the industry

by Anthony Harrington

THE tri-annual call for comment from the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) on the apprentice training levy has drawn a massive negative response from the Scottish building sector.

The Scottish Building Federation (SBF), and the Scottish Decorators' Federation (SDF) are both designated bodies, tasked with coordinating their member's responses to the CITB's tri-annual call for comment on the levy. The deadline for responses was September 29 and the outcome, as far as the Scottish bodies are concerned, has been far from what the CITB would have wished.

According to SBF more than two thirds of its members voted against CITB's proposals regarding the levy. In addition, some 89 per cent of SDF members rejected the proposals. Coming at a time when the industry faces a growing shortage of skilled tradespeople, the rejection has far reaching implications for the future health of the sector, and ultimately for the Scottish government's aspirations to see 50,000 new homes built in Scotland by 2021.

Commenting on the results of SBF's polling of members on the levy, SBF Managing Director Vaughan Hart said: "SBF members voted by a factor of two to one to reject CITB's proposals with feedback from levy payers in Scotland suggesting that industry employers feel

increasingly marginalised and overlooked."

The split between the building sector and the body tasked with overseeing skills development across the UK construction sector is particularly worrying, given the fact that the industry is currently losing significantly more people through retirement than it is recruiting each year.

Hart pointed out that the split is not a reflection of a bias against the cost of training, which everyone in the sector recognises as essential to maintain the health of the sector. Instead, the dissatisfaction stems from a perceived lack of transparency in the way the CITB operates and its perceived remoteness from the sector.

This is borne out by the fact that an overwhelming majority of members (94 per cent) said that they would be more inclined to support a continuation of the current levy and grant system if action were taken to make the governance and operation of the CITB more accountable to Scottish levy payers.

'Feedback from levy payers in Scotland suggests industry employers feel increasingly marginalised and overlooked.'

As things stand, however, Hart says that the responses demonstrate a general loss of confidence across the Scottish building industry in CITB's management of the levy, training and apprenticeships.

"Levy payers cited the recent CITB imposed deregulation and dilution of Scotland's proud craft apprenticeships as a symptom of the systematic failure and lack of transparency in CITB's current governance and operational arrangements," he said.

Hart told The Herald that this last point is particularly worrying for Scottish employers. Under its new, de-regulated framework governing how craft apprentices across Scotland are trained and employed, the CITB has removed the oversight the SBF traditionally provided, in joint consultation with the unions, over the conditions of employment of apprentices.

Unscrupulous employers are now free to sign up an apprentice for the whole four-year period on the minimum wage.

Hart points out that more than 300 Scottish construction companies, who between them collectively employ and train more than 1,500 apprentices, co-signed a letter to the CITB expressing concerns about its new apprentice training framework. The removal of the collectively bargained terms and conditions of employment for apprentices was a particular concern, as was the sense that the new framework would be weak on enforcing training standards.



The new framework brings to an end the existing mandatory requirements for building apprentices to be registered with recognised apprenticeship registration bodies, which includes the Scottish Building Apprenticeship and Training Council (SBATC) and the Scottish Painting and Decorating Apprenticeship Council. The SBATC dates back to 1934 and had overseen apprenticeships from that date. In the longer term, there are also concerns that

the new framework could lead to a de-skilling of the industry workforce by opening the door to diluted SVQ Level 2 apprenticeships in the traditional building trades, Hart says.

"Spanning many decades, we have a proud tradition of championing high quality skills, training and career opportunities for the many thousands of young people entering the construction industry each year. All of that is being placed at risk."

Ian Rogers, the chief executive of the SDF, was equally critical of the CITB's move. "It is deeply concerning that CITB, who are meant to carry out the industry's instructions, are acting in this very high-handed and intransigent manner, positioning themselves as working against the wishes of the industry in Scotland," he said.



Vaughan Hart talks of industry finding a Scottish solution

The Unite union also made its displeasure known. Steve Dillon, Unite regional coordinating officer commented: "We are extremely concerned by any move to undermine the pay, terms and conditions and skill level of Scottish construction apprentices." He called the collective bargaining structure adopted by SBATC "a shining light" to the sector, ensuring that young people entering the industry had the protection of trade union collectivism. That protection has now been removed by CITB, he said.

Hart points out that in previous

There is a worry that the tradition of championing high quality skills and training is being placed at risk

consultations, SBF members have consistently voted in favour of the CITB's proposals. The current rejection therefore speaks volumes about the scale of the dissatisfaction with the CITB's actions.

At the same time, Hart says the industry is very keen to work constructively with the Scottish government to ensure that the industry has a bright future.

"Through a more collaborative approach, I remain positive that there is every opportunity for us to find a distinctly Scottish solution to these issues that will ensure delivery of the high quality skills our industry will need in the years ahead."

Turning to the Scottish government's target of building 50,000 new homes by 2021, Hart said that SBF welcomed the initiative, but really wanted to see appropriate funding levels put in place.

"This is particularly important where councils and government are seeing to mandate higher standards of building for affordable housing.

"There can be cost implications for higher standards and such standards should not be achieved by squeezing builders' margins still further, at a time when Brexit is likely to generate higher materials costs," he warned. ■