



Communities and Local Government Committee

Oral evidence: [Building regulations](#), HC 906.
Monday, 20 January 2014

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Written evidence from witnesses:

[Department for Communities and Local Government](#)

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Members present: Mr Clive Betts (Chair); Bob Blackman; Simon Danczuk; Mrs Mary Glendon; James Morris; Mark Pawsey; Heather Wheeler; Chris Williamson; John Stevenson

Questions 149-227

Witnesses: **Stephen Williams MP**, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State and **Bob Ledsome**, Deputy Director, Building Regulations and Standards, Department for Communities and Local Government, gave evidence.

Q149 Chair: Welcome, everyone, to the second evidence session of our follow-up inquiry into building regulations on the certification of electrical installation and repairs in dwellings. Minister, you are very welcome back to the Committee for a second time. Before we go any further, can I ask those Members who have an interest to put it on the record at this stage?

Mrs Glendon: I have a relative who works in the industry.

Bob Blackman: I have a relative who is training to become an electrician.

Chair: We have that on the record. Minister, for the sake of our records as well, could you introduce your official who has come along with you today?

Stephen Williams: It is a pleasure to be here for the first time on my own, so I certainly have more to say than I did when I was before you last time with the entire ministerial team, minus the Secretary of State. This is obviously a very technical area, so I am pleased I have Bob Ledsome, the senior official in the Department, with me. No doubt, when some of your questions trip me up, Mr Ledsome will be here to bail me out.

Q150 Chair: You are both welcome. Just a nice easy one to start off with: Minister, what is the purpose of Part P for building regulations?

Stephen Williams: It is to make sure that electrical installations in domestic houses are done safely. It is not meant to cover every single piece of electrical work that might be done on somebody's house. It is meant to ensure that the most risky elements of electrical work to somebody's house, such as work on the circuitry in a house, changing the fuse box—something I had done to my house when I moved in at the end of 2010—or work in wet areas such as in the bathroom, installing a new shower, should be done by a competent person, so the householder has confidence that the work being carried out on their behalf is safe.

Q151 Chair: Everyone would probably agree that that is a very worthwhile objective, but presumably you have seen the oral evidence we have already taken, and had sight of the written evidence given to the Committee. Do you not have the slightest bit of doubt about whether there are people out there working under the banner of the competent person scheme who are clearly totally incompetent, yet doing work that householders believe somehow has been appropriately approved, and they are quite happy to rely on it for safety and everything else?

Stephen Williams: There are eight competent person schemes at the moment, although there are two really big players in the area: Certsure and NAPIT. We do require that they monitor the work of the people who register under their scheme and take appropriate action if they find, in spot checks, that the work is not up to standard. I have some statistics. Certsure, which in 2012 had 33,578 competent person members, suspended 59 members and terminated the membership of 48. The next biggest one, NAPIT, had 9,230 members, and they suspended 25 people and terminated 24; those are 2012 figures. Certainly, there is evidence that they have taken action against people whom they have found to be incompetent, as you put it, Chairman. Of course, these are spot checks, and as with all audits and spot checks, I would not say there is any pot luck or randomness about it, but they cannot be absolutely comprehensive. There has to be some sort of scalability as to whom you check and whom you do not.

Q152 Chair: The reality is that people actually doing the work in the home do not have to have any qualification at all, even though they are under this scheme, do they? Someone could come into your home who has never had any training or qualifications and is completely unable to understand what is required of them to do a job safely. They might be covered by the competent person scheme, and there they are in your home, doing the electrics. Does that not worry you?

Stephen Williams: As I understand it, the competent person would be the firm, which in many cases will be a sole trader. The individual whose name the firm practised under, which could be Betts and Co, would be the competent person and also the qualified supervisor. If they have other people doing the work for them, it may well be that the person who does the work at your home themselves does not have a full portfolio of qualifications. However, their work would have to be checked by a qualified supervisor from Betts and Co.

Q153 Chair: Not just a portfolio; they could have no qualifications, no training.

Stephen Williams: I am not sure that is correct.

Chair: It is correct, isn't it?

Bob Ledsome: As the Committee will know from the discussions it has had, particularly two weeks ago with the competent person scheme operators, the focus all along has been on competence, and there are a number of ways of achieving that competence. Of course, qualifications are one way, but—

Q154 Chair: Can I interrupt? The competence applies to the people who sign the work off nominally. For the actual work done, no one has to be deemed to be competent in any sense to be able to go into someone's home and do work under Part P, do they?

Bob Ledsome: The way the system operates is that the organisation needs to be able to assure the competent person scheme operator that the members of that company are competent to do whatever work they are asked to do.

Q155 Chair: But the person doing the work does not have to be competent or to have had any training at all. That is true, isn't it?

Bob Ledsome: I cannot say that is true.

Q156 Chair: No, it is true: they do not have to have any training, do they?

Bob Ledsome: It would depend on what job they are doing. If they are helping with the preparatory work, then it may well be that they do not have formal training for that sort of thing.

Q157 Chair: No, wait a minute. Under the scheme, the individual doing the work—the full work of installing a shower or bath, rewiring a house—does not need to have any training or any qualifications. That is true, isn't it?

Bob Ledsome: Well, it depends—yes.

Stephen Williams: But they would not be able to walk away and advise the householder that it was now safe to use that shower or turn on the electrics at the fuse box, unless the qualified supervisor from that firm had signed off the work. It is up to the competent person—the owner of the business in this case, whether it is a sole trader or a limited company—to satisfy themselves that the people who are doing work on their behalf are trained to a sufficient standard. This is obviously work predominantly carried out in the private sector, where reputation is everything. You would hope that common sense suggests that, if you are the competent person, you would not want incompetent people carrying out work in your name.

Q158 Chair: We are just talking about the people who are within the scheme. NAPIT said to us there are 18,000 electrical installers out there who are not even part of the scheme, but are probably doing work that is covered by Part P. Are you comfortable that that is all right out there, or should the Department be doing more to deal with these potential breaches of Part P by installers who are not actually even covered by the competent person scheme at all?

Stephen Williams: I understand the estimates are of about 58,000 people who carry out electrical work around the country at the moment. About 40,000 are now competent persons within the scheme, which is a 27,000 increase from where we were when Part P was introduced. I suppose I would be concerned, and I am sure we would all be concerned, if those people who are not in a competent person scheme, or do not have qualifications, were carrying out work that required them to be a competent person.

Q159 Chair: Some of them are, aren't they?

Stephen Williams: Quite possibly so, if there is evidence that suggests that, but that would be an enforcement issue for the local council.

Q160 Chair: We might come back to enforcement in a minute, but what is the Department doing to address that very real problem of work being done outside Part P when it should be covered by Part P?

Stephen Williams: We have these eight recognised schemes. As I mentioned, by far and away the two largest ones are competent persons. We require them as part of their registration with the Department to promote their own scheme, but more widely to promote to the public—our constituents—that they should make sure when someone is carrying out electrical work to their property that they are competent to do so. Obviously, it is quite hard to legislate or require householders to satisfy themselves that the person who turns up is a member of a registered scheme. Nonetheless, we require the competent persons to do their best to advertise their own scheme, but also to advertise more generally the importance of electrical safety.

Q161 Chair: We will come back to awareness in a minute, but I have a very specific question. Is the Department planning to do any more to deal with this problem of the 18,000 electrical installers who are not part of a competent person scheme, but are probably doing work that is covered by the scheme?

Bob Ledsome: The first thing we would be looking to do is work with organisations like the Electrical Safety Council and the competent person schemes, in terms of publicity and getting the message to householders, and others who are thinking about having electrical work undertaken, that they should be looking to use an electrician registered with one of those schemes. That is one important piece of work.

The second piece of work, as we said in a commitment we gave to the Committee in the response to your original report, will be to look at the impacts of Part P and the changes that were made to it, and then to come back to look again at what has happened and whether there are lessons to be learned from that.

Q162 Heather Wheeler: Minister, it is good to see you here, and as you say, to be able to talk today, which is excellent. You had about three seconds in the previous session.

Stephen Williams: Only because I elbowed my way in, as well.

Q163 Heather Wheeler: Absolutely; it was a very important three seconds, Minister. I remember it well. We did a report back in 2012, and the Government as part of

its reply to us said that there would be a review of the operation after two years. I am wondering whether you are in a position today to give us a bit of a timetable for the review of the revised Part P.

Stephen Williams: My predecessor, Don Foster, said there would be a review of the whole of Part P in two years, but in June this year we will be reviewing whether competent person scheme operators have met our conditions in full. There is a review of the entirety of Part P, which will come back in the spring of 2015. One of the advantages of a fixed-term Parliament is that we ought to be able to make sure that that comes back on a timely basis for this Committee to look at. Specifically in June 2014, we will be looking at whether the scheme operators met the conditions in full.

Q164 Heather Wheeler: Right, so it is really more of a view of the competence scheme, rather than the whole of Part P.

Stephen Williams: As I understand it, in June 2014 we are having a review of the competence scheme itself, but on the review of the whole of Part P as a building regulation, my predecessor said he would come back to this Committee in the spring of 2015, which I guess means before 31 March.

Q165 Heather Wheeler: Right, so it has slipped about nine months. Okay, that is fair enough. What I am now interested in particularly is the review of the competence part, first of all, because nine months later we can talk about the other one. How are you going to deal with that in a really independent way? We are concerned that we are hearing different voices from different vested interests, but also they have valid serious concerns. How can you show us that it will be an independent review?

Bob Ledsome: The review that the Minister mentioned is the culmination of two years' worth of work that has been undertaken by the UK Accreditation Service to look at the competent person scheme operators—those working both on electrical work and across the field in all areas that are covered by the competent person scheme arrangements. We have asked UKAS to do two things: first, to review each of the scheme operators to see whether they are worthy of accreditation against a formal quality standard that covers the sorts of work that the competent person scheme operators undertake. That is called EN 45011. So there is a formal review by UKAS of the management systems of the organisation to meet the quality standards therein.

Secondly, UKAS will look specifically at the conditions of authorisation that we issued in June 2012. These are the formal conditions that govern whether we would accept and authorise a competent person scheme operator to act in that role. All of the competent person scheme operators have undertaken to meet these conditions. We have asked UKAS to undertake an assessment of each of the schemes against those conditions, and then advise us in June 2014 as to whether the schemes have met those conditions or not. We have had some recent information from UKAS recording that, for example, a number of the schemes in this field, particularly Certsure and NAPIT, have met the first of those criteria—i.e. they have achieved the formal accreditation against the EN 45011 standard, and they are working through their assessment against the conditions of authorisation.

Q166 Heather Wheeler: That is a really good answer, except it slightly gives me the feeling that this is a bit of a tick-box exercise. I think people want to know that the quality of the competent person is adequate, rather than that they filled in the form correctly and the cheque did not bounce. To give you an example, we have taken evidence from people who say that, in effect, you could do a three or five-week course and change yourself from being a conservatory erector to a conservatory and bathroom extension director, and you are going to be competent. I do not think people want an electrician who has had five weeks' training; they want an electrician who has had three years' training.

Bob Ledsome: I can perhaps answer that point by referring to one of the specific conditions that we issue. Condition 9 is exactly about this issue of the scheme operator, i.e. the Certsures or the NAPITs of this world, assessing that those installers who want to be members of their scheme are technically competent against the relevant occupational standards. That is in the light of the relevant assessment procedure, which you might have heard about a couple of weeks ago: the Electrotechnical Assessment Specification, which sets out what is required and what someone like Certsure or NAPIT would be looking for, including the relevant qualifications for the qualified supervisor. That is a condition that the scheme operator has to meet.

We would be expecting UKAS, as part of its assessment work, to be looking at how the scheme operator undertakes and meets that condition: what does the operator do to go round and assess competence? That could involve a number of things. It would involve some deskwork, looking at records and so on, but it does involve UKAS going out to witness some of this work as it is happening. So it is not just, "Have you got the right piece of paper?" and we will tick the box. There is more to it than that.

It is worth also mentioning, for example, that to help them do this work, UKAS have worked with the Local Authority Building Control organisation, the representative body for local authority building control, to get some technical expertise contracted into UKAS to help them deal with some of the technical questions. We feel there is a robust system in place enabling UKAS to provide for the Department and Ministers an assurance that there has been a rigorous assessment process, and that the relevant scheme operator has indeed met those conditions.

Stephen Williams: Heather, you said you would not want someone turning up who had previously installed conservatories and done a five-week conversion course. The competent person in many cases will be the qualified supervisor, and for that they would have to have a level 3 qualification, which is the equivalent of an A-level or an advanced apprenticeship, depending on which way you want to describe it. That would typically take at least two or three years. I think that would meet the requirements you are looking for. There may of course be other people working under their supervision who perhaps have done the shorter period of on-the-job training that you described.

Q167 Heather Wheeler: We are pleased that you are doing this two-year review and the specific review on the competence scheme. Do you think that you are looking at further changes, particularly on third-party certification? Do you think that might come out of that review?

Bob Ledsome: One of the changes we made to Part P—it came into force in April last year—was to enable installers, if they so wished, to have a third party certify their

work as meeting the requirements of the building regulations. That is already on the statute book; that was a change we introduced in April 2013. In the autumn, we invited organisations to come forward to be the equivalent of a competent person scheme operator; you would have an organisation with a register of people who could undertake this third-party certification work. We invited people to come forward to ask for authorisation. We have a similar set of conditions of authorisation, so the ones I was talking about earlier apply to those organisations. Some organisations have put their names forward to develop such a scheme, and we are assessing those at the moment. We have not reached any final decisions as to whether they have met that standard or not. If they do meet that standard, I would envisage recommendations going to Ministers over the next couple of months as to whether those schemes are then going to be authorised.

Q168 Chair: Will the UKAS review results be published?

Bob Ledsome: I am not sure about the detail of the UKAS survey results, but clearly, on the matter of who has passed, I am sure that Ministers will want to say something about that at the time.

Q169 Chair: Perhaps the Minister could help the Committee now?

Stephen Williams: I would have to look at the findings of that review at that time. I believe transparency is a good thing, so I would want to see a very good reason, if that information was provided to Government, as to why it should not be published. As it has not come anywhere near me yet, I cannot say any more than that.

Q170 Chair: Perhaps we could have a little note on that, Minister. It slightly worries me when we get an answer like, “We will look at it at the time”. It is like, “If the survey gives good news, then we will publish; if it gives bad news, we will not.”

Stephen Williams: That was not quite what I meant.

Bob Ledsome: The proof of the pudding will be whether the scheme operators have met the conditions of authorisation. Of course, if they do not, that puts them in a situation where the question is whether their authorisation should remain. That would obviously be a very serious position for the scheme operator, and a very serious step to be taken by the Government.

Q171 Chair: The more serious it is, the more important it is that we see what has come out of the review, isn't it?

Stephen Williams: Yes. I did say earlier we are doing a review that will be completed hopefully in June this year. If that is part of that, I am sure you will want to speak to me and Bob in five months' time.

Q172 Chair: We can have a note that in principle you intend to make that public. That is about the review of the competent persons element. In terms of the wider review of the changes to Part P, which you had promised that you would do within two years when you replied to our 2012 report, what is the timetable for that now?

Bob Ledsome: We would need to look at the data available, and what conclusions one can draw from that about the impact of the changes. Clearly, for that to be done in terms of the timetable the Minister referred to, we would be looking to start that process this year.

Q173 Chair: With a view to concluding by?

Bob Ledsome: We would come back to you in spring 2015.

Q174 Chair: That would be things like the decision to take working kitchens out not being notifiable in the future outside Part P.

Bob Ledsome: As part of the review, the work that we do will look at what evidence is available to see—

Q175 Chair: It would look at the impact of those changes.

Bob Ledsome: It would look at the impact of those changes, yes.

Q176 Mrs Glindon: I would like to come back to public awareness. After eight years of the scheme running, it has been found that only 14% of the public are aware of Part P and the scheme. Minister, do you think the Government really needs to take some radical action to raise awareness?

Stephen Williams: I certainly agree with you, Mary, that, on the face of it, it is a problem. I guess this is something where the Committee Members have gone through the same process. You did not really think about it much as an individual before. Whenever I have had electrical work done myself, I did not know whether the person who did the work to my premises was a competent person. It is not the sort of phrase that a householder would use. I was certainly concerned whether the person had a good reputation, had been recommended to me and was qualified to do what he was doing, because it was some serious work to my house, but the phrase “competent person” is probably something that 99.9% of our constituents would not necessarily recognise. There is an issue there.

Whatever we call these particular schemes, the issue arises when somebody looks in a local directory or, far more likely these days, does an online search for an electrician in their area. I did this exercise. In between oral questions and coming here, I googled “Electricians, Bristol” just to see what the results would be. Lo and behold, most of the earlier results were adverts, for which people had obviously paid to have a higher Google alert. The rest were general trade directories, such as Yell or Thomson. I could not easily find whether any of these people were competent persons or not. From a consumer’s perspective, I can certainly recognise the problem. We do require the scheme operators to promote their schemes as far as possible, but obviously from the statistic you gave me, that penetration does not seem to be as high as we would like, at the moment.

Q177 Mrs Glindon: Do you think it is partly the fault of the Government that people are not aware?

Stephen Williams: It is very easy to blame the Government for things or expect the Government to do everything. That depends on your political mindset. I am not sure, when you are doing plumbing, electrical, or gas work or whatever to your house, the first thing that springs to mind is, “What does the Government tell me about this?” or “Where does the Government tell me to look?” I do not think people think that way. Nonetheless, the Department does have a link to these particular schemes on its website. We do have leaflets that are available on building work that specify where we would expect people to look. We have done that as a Government, and we would expect local authorities to have information available as well. Again, the problem for most of our constituents is that local or national Government is probably not where you would look if you were trying to find an electrician.

Q178 Mrs Glendon: Further on that, whose responsibility should it be if this is something that could put the public at risk if they are not aware of having a competent person? That is probably about not just whether it is the Government’s responsibility, but who should take responsibility if it is a risk, which it could be. You yourself, Minister, have said you did not know that you should have a competent person. If you do not have a competent person, what could happen? If there is public risk, should some responsibility for raising awareness be taken at Government level?

Stephen Williams: Our responsibility is to make sure that the competent person schemes are doing what we require of them in terms of raising public awareness. That is the key duty that we place upon them. They do undertake, so they tell us, newspaper and Tube campaigns. One of them even claims to sponsor a football team in order to raise awareness. I imagine it is quite a small football team, because they have not told us which one it is. One of the problems that the Committee has rightly identified is that because there are eight schemes, there is a danger that there are lots of adverts and awareness campaigns out there, and collectively they are not raising awareness as much as we would like. I very much welcome the work that you have done, and the work that we have done as a Department in talking to the various providers.

I met the Chief Executives of the two biggest ones, Certsure and NAPIT, with officials last week. They say they are now coming together to have a common portal and branding so that people will be able to search one particular website. The problem I had myself half an hour ago will, hopefully, in due course, no longer exist. The Committee has done a useful job of work in interrogating them and helping them with that process.

Q179 Mrs Glendon: Whether these things work or not, what level of awareness would you expect the public to have in the next 18 months?

Stephen Williams: In the nine years I have been an MP, I have always been sceptical of Government targets. As for setting a target for awareness, that is probably more nebulous than many other targets I have heard of. I am loth to put a figure on it. You said it was 14% from one survey that you have been aware of so far. We would certainly aim for significantly higher than that, but I would not like to put a number on it.

Mrs Glendon: Just in the interests of public safety.

Bob Ledsome: There is some further information that might be of interest to the Committee. It is some work that the Electrical Safety Council has done; I think that is where the 14% figure to which you refer derives. When the ESC asked a slightly different question to members of the public, which was not, “Do you know about the building regulations, Part P?”, but a more direct, “Do you know whether you should have a trained, qualified registered electrician?” then the awareness was a much higher figure at 50%. Admittedly, that is not as high a figure as one might want, but it was a higher figure when the question was asked, “Do you know of the need to have a trained, qualified electrician?” so there is something there to build on as well.

Q180 Mrs Glindon: Personally, I see the difference between those. My husband was an electrician. He trained for five years many moons ago and worked for years as an electrician/build manager. Now people might say, “Could you just do this for me in my house?” He cannot, because he does not have the Part P competent persons. When people do say that, he is honest and says, “No, I can’t do it”, even though he is fully qualified. There is no awareness there by members of the public asking someone they know or believe to be fully trained; he is a fully trained electrician, but he does not have that competency. It is quite important. They may ask somebody who is not as qualified. People know he is an electrician, but he has not got the competency or qualification. The public awareness, which I am sure is common among many people, is not to the level that perhaps it should be on this important issue.

Stephen Williams: Ideally, we would all like to believe that we and our constituents have safety pretty well up the hierarchy when you are making these decisions, but a lot of it comes to convenience, price and perhaps recommendation from somebody else. The work that person has done for somebody else may not be as complicated as you want yourselves, and I suppose people have to weigh up all these things. We would hope that safety ranks very highly, but that is why we do need to drive awareness that you should make sure, if somebody is doing complicated work to your premises, either they are personally qualified to do it or somebody is going to come and check their work who is competent to sign it off.

Chair: Mr Ledsome, I don’t know whether the irony of what you just said passed you by at that point: that the public are aware that they need to have someone qualified to do the work in their home. It is not actually what they get with the competent person scheme, is it? That is what the public think, isn’t it? The person actually with the tools in their hand is capable and qualified to do the job.

Q181 Simon Danczuk: Minister, I think the public watching this will be quite surprised by how relaxed you are about this. I think they will think the Minister seems exceptionally relaxed about what I would describe as a disaster waiting to happen. Could you tell the Committee and the wider public what two, three, or four steps you are taking to address what you described earlier as a problem? What immediate action are you taking to address this disaster waiting to happen?

Stephen Williams: I am not sure the advice that has been given to me implies that there is a disaster waiting to happen. The advice that has been given to me suggests that this scheme, which was introduced in 2005 and revised just over a year ago, is now

focused on the most risky areas of work. We do have requirements under the competent person schemes that are out there. We have seen, in the data I gave in the very first answer, the number of people who are registered as a competent person has gone up by 27,000 in the last year. I would not describe that as a disaster waiting to happen.

Q182 Simon Danczuk: Are you comfortable, though? Are you relaxed about it?

Stephen Williams: Mr Chairman, I am trying to answer the questions in a friendly and maybe relaxed way, but that should not suggest that either I or anyone who advises me is relaxed about the fact that there may still be some residual risk out there. Like I said, there are some people carrying out work who may not be a competent person.

Q183 Simon Danczuk: What immediate actions are you taking?

Stephen Williams: I would not say that we are taking immediate action. In order to take immediate action, you would have to be presented with evidence that there was an immediate risk. I have not heard, unless in your next question you are about to throw something at me, that there is an immediate risk that needs an immediate pulling of the lever in DCLG.

Q184 Simon Danczuk: Only 14% of the public understand how the system works.

Stephen Williams: To say there is a disaster waiting to happen based on a survey of awareness is a little bit of hyperbole, if I may say so. I agreed with Mary's question earlier; we would clearly want more than 14% of the public to be aware of the competent person scheme, but the fact that awareness is not high is not a disaster waiting to happen.

Q185 Simon Danczuk: Bob, do you believe that there are competent electricians operating at the moment who have had only five to six weeks' training?

Bob Ledsome: There may well be some electricians that have had only that formal training, those formal five-week courses. On the other hand, there may be electricians who have long experience. There may be situations where they are coming back into the industry and therefore all they would need is that five or six-week course. So yes, that is the case, but I do not think that one can necessarily infer from that that those electricians are not then capable of doing work and doing it safely.

Q186 Simon Danczuk: So you agree, Bob, that there are some so-called competent electricians that have had only five or six weeks' training.

Bob Ledsome: I cannot deny that that may well be the case.

Q187 Simon Danczuk: Do you know how many? Have you any idea?

Bob Ledsome: I would not know how many, no.

Q188 Simon Danczuk: So it could be a lot.

Bob Ledsome: I could not give you a number, because we do not have access to that sort of information.

Q189 Simon Danczuk: Whose job do you think it is to ensure that there is a common approach to training in relation to this industry and this sector?

Bob Ledsome: This is something the industry needs to take forward. Many of the schemes that have been put in place are of very long standing. They have been developed over many years. The documentation to which we have referred has been developed by industry bodies across the piece, so clearly the industry understands the need for work to be done safely, and they have put in place these systems to try and ensure that is delivered.

Q190 Simon Danczuk: So, as far as you are concerned it is the role of the industry to self-regulate and organise the training. At no stage in answering that question did you say that Government has a role to play in terms of organising the training.

Stephen Williams: If I may—

Simon Danczuk: I was just interested in Bob's response to that. In answering that question, you did not mention Government once in terms of helping to organise and regulate training. You do not think it has a part to play.

Bob Ledsome: The approach that is taken in this field, as in many other fields, is within the overall framework that the Government has adopted across the piece in terms of skills development. There are a set of national occupational standards that are developed; there are minimum technical competencies and assessment processes that are put in place to provide the assurance that these standards are being met. It is not for me to say what Government policy on skills should be across the piece. All I can say is that the approach that we have in place for this particular sector follows that general approach that Government has put in place. It has been around for many, many years, as the Committee will know. That is the first point.

The second point is: it is an approach that is based on what the industry has developed over time. The Government second guesses the expertise of industry developing these things at its peril, it would seem to me.

Q191 Simon Danczuk: Is one of the fundamental problems not that the scheme operators are in competition with each other?

Bob Ledsome: We would not accept that supposition at all. The scheme operators know very well that there is a reputation issue for them and the industry as a whole if they are seen to be competing in ways that might lead to perceptions that corners are being cut. We do not believe that that is the case at all. That is why it is very pleasing, as the Minister reported a while ago, that NAPIT and Certsure have now come together to take this common approach to branding, which is obviously dealing with an issue that was of concern to the Committee.

Stephen Williams: Can I come back to Simon's point about what the role for Government in setting skills standards is? It is the view of this Government, and also the previous Government, that you do need to work with industries themselves in order to set and raise standards. That is why various sector skills councils were set up during the period of the last administration. Often they have quite peculiar names. Summit is the sector skills council that looks at this area. That approach, Mr Danczuk, was okay under

Gordon Brown and Tony Blair, to work with the private sector in order to set skills standards right across particular industries. I used to meet with them on a regular basis as the Lib Dem shadow in that area at that time.

Q192 Bob Blackman: I just want to be clear what your position is, Mr Williams, in relation to the individual turning up at the house and the level of qualification they need to do the job—not being overseen, but to do the job; actually carrying out the work.

Stephen Williams: As I understand it, if the competent person was a partnership or a limited company that had several employees that carried out the work, some of those employees may not have formal recognised qualifications of the type that I described to Heather earlier. That is common right across industry, whether it is in the building trade or whatever. There are people who are carry out the work, but it should be under the supervision of others.

Q193 Bob Blackman: Are you comfortable that that is currently the position, where someone can turn up and say, “I am an electrician”—they do not say, “I am a competent person”—do the work, and then someone else has to oversee that and sign it off? Are you comfortable with that position?

Stephen Williams: If you put it like that, that would obviously give cause for concern. The person has turned up to your house, having made the commercial arrangement, agreed the price and whatever else in, as I was saying earlier, the hierarchy of decisions the householder has made. You have engaged somebody to carry out the work. As a householder, I'm not sure what you do at that point, how you check whether the person that turns up to do it has particular qualifications.

Q194 Bob Blackman: We already know that the householders do not know, because there is only 14% awareness of the scheme in its own right. You would not know; you would just make the presumption. You have placed the contract with a firm and they send along someone who, quite frankly, could have started work for them the previous day with no experience whatsoever and who works unsupervised. Someone then comes along and says, “Yes, this work is okay.” That, to you, is acceptable.

Stephen Williams: For the purposes of your question, you describe what I would regard as an extreme scenario—that someone who had been working for just one day in that particular area would be sent along to do a piece of work. It would depend on whether you should be concerned as to how complex you knew the work being carried out on your behalf was.

As a householder, I would be concerned if, chatting to this person who turned up at my house, he said, “Hey, I just started work yesterday. You are my first job. Now let me install your new shower unit for you.” I would probably raise my eyebrows. If they came to connect my cooker, I probably would not. Some responsibility has to rest with the citizen to ask the appropriate questions if they know that the work is of sufficient complexity that safety should be higher up the hierarchy of decision-making.

Q195 Bob Blackman: In the evidence we have received, for example, from NAPIT, they make the position clear. If you are a sole trader—or, as you say, you may be a partner

with two or three other electricians—clearly, those people are going to be qualified. These people are going to be qualified to do the job, because otherwise they presumably have to acquire someone else to come in and qualify the work. They will be qualified.

A firm that has one QS and 200 members of staff who are not competent persons is perfectly able to say, “We send out the 200 people. They do the work and our QS comes along and signs it off at the end.” To me, that seems to be both unfair on very small businesses and also very unfair on the householders, who think they are getting a qualified electrician to come in and do the job. What is your view on that?

Stephen Williams: I am not sure that consumers, whether it is for electrical work or other work, always have an expectation that the person who is doing the work initially has the highest level of qualification available. It is quite common right across trades and professions for work to be undertaken by people who have basic qualifications or are qualified by experience, but you always would have the expectation that a supervisor or a manager ultimately authorises that work before, in this case, it is safe to use the equipment and, certainly, before you would be expected to pay.

Q196 Bob Blackman: What do you think is the reasonable ratio of Qs to the people they are supervising?

Stephen Williams: In the example you gave, where the competent person may have 200 employees, I am not sure what the ratio would be or whether there are set requirements.

Bob Ledsome: There would not be a set ratio, but what is clear in the relevant technical documentation is there needs to be a sufficient number of qualified supervisors appointed to enable assurance to be given that the qualified supervisor can properly undertake his or her responsibilities, which, within the document, are about the day-to-day ensuring that the work is being done.

Q197 Bob Blackman: At the moment, however, there is no set standard.

Bob Ledsome: There is not.

Bob Blackman: It is not one in 10; it is not one in 20; it is not one in 100. It could be one in 1,000—and everyone would be comfortable with that.

Bob Ledsome: It would be interesting if that sort of ratio would apply, because what we are talking about here is that this would be one of those matters you would expect the registering body—the Certsure or the NAPIT—to be looking at as to whether it was appropriate for such an organisation running at that level of ratio of individual installers to qualified supervisors to be competent and meet the requirements of the competent person scheme in the first place.

Q198 Bob Blackman: Would it not be better if every individual who was turning up at a household had a licence to operate? They do not have to be a competent person. The Government would be saying, “This person has a degree of experience and capability to call themselves an electrician,” rather than the individual being able to turn up and say, “I am an

electrician.” No one knows whether they have 20 years’ experience in the industry—although it might be apparent—or none at all.

Stephen Williams: The licence-to-practise system you are describing is probably what happens in Germany. It is a much more regulated labour market, but successive Governments—this one, the previous one and Governments prior to that—have always resisted it. That would be quite a major policy change: to say that everyone working in a particular industry has a licence to practise.

Bob Blackman: That does not mean to say it is not a good thing to do.

Stephen Williams: I did not say it was not a good thing to do.

Bob Blackman: I am asking for your view on whether that is—

Stephen Williams: I am saying that that has been the policy of successive Governments, including the previous one: that you would not require every individual practising in a certain area to have a formal licence to practise—whether it is carrying out electrical work or, as I believe is the case in Germany, even the cutting of hair. You need to have a licence to practise in order to do it. That is not the system we have in the way we regulate our labour market in this country. It would be a major change.

We do have a system where we expect each firm to accept liability if mistakes are made, which means they would have to have procedures in place to minimise the risk of those mistakes being made by having sufficient qualified supervisors to make sure they could sign off the work.

This is how the market works, isn’t it? I am somewhat surprised to be asked that question. It is much the same if you are a top QC. An opinion is given in your name. The chances are you did not write it, but you have to make sure that what goes out in your name is going to stand up under scrutiny—otherwise you will lose face, market share and business.

Bob Blackman: Taking your example, a top QC is likely to have a junior who at least has a law degree.

Stephen Williams: Several juniors.

Bob Blackman: They will have several degrees and several amounts of experience, before they sign that off.

Stephen Williams: I am sorry, Mr Blackman; having worked in this area, you may be writing opinions on your first day at work.

Q199 Bob Blackman: That is the issue. One of the things here is that they could be doing a very complex job—for example, a complete kitchen or bathroom installation. They could be doing very risky work without any training whatsoever. That is my concern. People can just walk in the door without any qualifications whatsoever and say, “I am an electrician. Do not worry: my boss is going to come along.” They may have covered some stuff up. The boss inspects it as best they can, but cannot see everything because they are not there doing the work or overseeing the work all the way through the job.

The job could go on for several days and it could be obscure to both the householder, who is not going to oversee every single thing that an electrician does, and, indeed, the individual, who may not be doing it deliberately, but they are just not trained and competent to do the job. That is my principal concern.

There is one final issue from me. The QS arrangements increased in April 2013 from the original arrangements in 2005, the standards, but I understand that grandfather rights were applied to people who were already qualified. Can we be clear how many people are taking advantage of those grandfather rights and have not necessarily reached the further qualifications required?

Bob Ledsome: I do not have that information with me, sir.

Stephen Williams: That is something we will need to write to you about.

Bob Blackman: That would be very helpful.

Stephen Williams: It is not something I have in front of me. Certainly, now it is a level 3 qualification; you are saying there could have been people at level 2 or entry level who are qualified by experience.

Bob Blackman: I want to be clear on what the numbers are.

Stephen Williams: We will need to write to you on that specific question.

Q200 Mark Pawsey: Mr Blackman has just described the situation we are all concerned about, and one that you yourself told us you had put yourself in, which is where you invite an electrician to come in and do some work and you ask the question, “Is this person competent to do the work I want them to do?” Even if the person is competent, the landscape is highly complicated and I suspect that most householders would not understand the answer anyway, because of the fact that we have eight schemes and two registers. There are all these abbreviations flying around and the public are not generally any the wiser. What is the problem with having one brand that the entire electrical industry can come together under?

Stephen Williams: I entirely agree with you, Mark. The Committee has done good work in highlighting this issue. That is why I am pleased that the two biggest brand holders in this area are now going to come together and come up with a common domain name. As well as googling electricians in Bristol, I did actually google their names to see what came up. Certsure do all sorts of things other than this area. The Electrical Safety Register is described as one of their brands, which is an interesting way of promoting it.

The domain name was something like—we will need to write to the Chairman to say exactly what it is, once they have told us exactly what it is—the “Electrical Competent Person Scheme”.

Q201 Mark Pawsey: If you do not even know the name yet, we are nowhere near a timetable for getting anything sorted, are we?

Stephen Williams: They told us the name last week when we met them; it is just my memory that is deficient at the moment. I did specifically say to them, “Can we tell

the Committee what the name is?" I am looking to see whether inspiration, as they call it in the Chambers, is going to come from my right.

Bob Ledsome: I was referring to a letter which may have been copied to you, Chairman.

Stephen Williams: There was a letter to me that said they were going to go down this road. They have now gone down the road. The specific question I asked them was, "Have you made sure you have secured all the domain names that could possibly cover this?" They said they had and that they were about to make an announcement and have a common brand, which was a plug with a roof over it, to promote it.

Q202 Mark Pawsey: Minister, the Committee has also heard these promises, going back to when we embarked on this inquiry originally, probably about two or three years ago. What can you do to make it happen?

Stephen Williams: We have met with them. I would say this is a good example of Government and scrutiny working in partnership and making something happen. Left to their own volition, without this Committee initiating this inquiry, perhaps they would not have gone down this road, but when I met them last week they assured me they now have got to a point where they can see that it is a problem that concerns us, because it concerns some of our constituents.

They are going to come up with this common portal, which, as I say, will hopefully deal with the problem and, when you search for qualified electricians, it will be the first thing that comes up, rather than perhaps being the 27th thing that comes up.

Q203 Mark Pawsey: Given that this is taking an awfully long time, what is preventing the Government from doing exactly the same as the Government does with Gas Safe, which is to hold the register and then license it?

Stephen Williams: I do not know the answer to that.

Bob Ledsome: The position the Government would adopt in all of these things is that this is something for the industry to take forward.

Mark Pawsey: The industry has not delivered, Mr Ledsome.

Bob Ledsome: We now have the commitment from the two organisations. It has taken time; everyone would accept it has taken a period of time.

Q204 Mark Pawsey: Is the political will there? If the industry carries on prevaricating in the way that it has done, might the Government step in with a scheme for electrical contractors along the lines of Gas Safe?

Stephen Williams: We met them last week, which I have no doubt was not entirely coincidental with the hearing taking place today, and I specifically asked them, "Are you now going to do this? Can I tell the Committee you are going to do it?" They did not actually say, "Yes, Minister." No one has said that to me yet. They said, "Yes, you could." and they did tell me the domain name, which I am very sorry I cannot remember at the moment.

Given that they said that and they said I could tell you, I would be very annoyed indeed if I found they were now dragging their feet on doing it. In as far as I know what our powers are in this area, their collars would be well and truly felt if we felt they were dragging their feet on doing it.

Q205 Mark Pawsey: To push you a little bit further, is the fall-back position that you could and would have the power and the will to introduce a Gas Safe-type register for the electrical contracting industry?

Stephen Williams: I am not clear whether we have the power.

Bob Ledsome: We would have to change the basis for regulating competent person schemes in this area. At the very least, we would have to withdraw the authorisations that currently exist. That would be a big step with all sorts of ramifications.

Secondly, we would then have to establish a regulatory structure to put in place something equivalent to Gas Safe, which, obviously, is under the health and safety regulations. We would obviously need to make sure we got the legal framework correct. We would then have to think about who would take on this register, how that would work and how it would work in relation to the existing scheme operators and the liabilities and assets the existing scheme operators have. Would they transfer to this new organisation?

It is not something that Government could do overnight; there are a number of issues that would need to be thought through. Obviously, Ministers are being very cautious about this. I believe you did look at this in your original report and felt that that was not the way forward, which I recognise was the Committee's view at the time.

Chair: Thank you for that answer, even if the name awareness was a little below 14% on this occasion.

Q206 James Morris: We have received quite a lot of evidence of concern about the lack of external enforcement of Part P and the application of Part P. Would you accept that there is a problem with enforcement of Part P?

Stephen Williams: Ultimately, as I understand it, enforcement would be the responsibility of the local authority, because it is their job to enforce the general application of all building regulations. Of course, under this competent person scheme, as well as the consumer receiving the piece of paper signed off by the qualified supervisor, who may well be the competent person themselves, about the work they have done, a copy goes to the building control authority, the local council.

Ultimately, it is up to them. If people make complaints about the nature of work that is done, it is up to them to take enforcement action. Of course, sanctions are available, including, as I understand it, ultimately, fines.

Q207 James Morris: Is the reality not that, actually, building control does not have that level of enforcement power, and in order to effectively enforce the scheme externally, we need to give local authorities greater power?

Stephen Williams: I do not know whether authorities require greater power in order to enforce building regulations. There might be an issue as to what particular priority local authorities decide to give to enforcement, whether or not it is of building regulations. Many of us as constituency MPs know that planning enforcement is also often something that people feel is not prioritised as much as it should be.

Q208 James Morris: We received evidence from a previous session that local authorities' building control very often said, "No, that is not our job. It is not our job to enforce this scheme." We have heard contrary evidence that they should have more power and that building control should turn up to sign off all electrical installations that have been implemented in households.

Bob Ledsome: The way the scheme operates is that the work is undertaken by a competent person, a member of a competent person scheme. The local authority building control can then accept that as evidence and not, therefore, intervene. If there were a real problem, the local authority would retain its powers to intervene.

I was looking for some information, which I now have, which is a survey undertaken under the aegis of the Building Control Alliance. That covers local authority building control but also the private sector improvement inspectors. It is a survey of regulatory interventions by building control bodies, which dates back to November 2011, but it is the most comprehensive piece of work that has been done to see what levels of intervention have been undertaken by building control bodies.

In that month, there were over 9,000 interventions by building control bodies relating to Part P. The idea that building control bodies do not get involved in Part P is not substantiated by that report.

Q209 James Morris: Do they need more power? Do they need to be given a greater role than they currently have, given some of the concerns we have heard in evidence?

Bob Ledsome: Local authorities have the ability to enforce the building regulations. Clearly, that is a matter of judgement for the local authority building control body, as to how they exercise those powers.

Q210 James Morris: I am sorry to interrupt. You talked about 9,000 interventions; what was the nature of those interventions? Were they fines?

Bob Ledsome: It could range from, at one end, an actual, formal intervention that requires, "You shall do this, otherwise I shall take formal enforcement action," to actually providing advice: "There is a problem with this piece of work; you need to fix it in this sort of way." It covers that range. Unfortunately, we do not have the breakdown of information that provides the level of granularity—

Q211 James Morris: From what I am hearing, you are arguing—I think the Minister is arguing this, too—that the enforcement regime is adequate in its current form; it does not require any further development or resources.

Bob Ledsome: As part of the review that was undertaken in 2012 and 2013, the Government did look at enforcement issues more generally and there was a consultation

on that. The sorts of things that the Government was looking at in that consultation were the levels of fines available if a matter goes to court, and whether there are other enforcement tools that might be made available to local authority building control. There are some issues there, and those are things the Government is continuing to look at.

Q212 James Morris: Have you considered and thought whether or not that is a way forward following the consultation—greater fines and a stricter enforcement regime than the one we currently have?

Stephen Williams: That would depend on whether there was sufficient failure in the system at the moment to think there was a significant risk to public safety, in the nature of a disaster waiting to happen, to coin a phrase that was used earlier.

At the moment, as I said earlier, I do not think there is a disaster waiting to happen. Fortunately, in this country we do seem to have a very good safety record in terms of the data we have. Deaths resulting from faulty electrical work are, in the most recent year, at 47, which is 47 too many, but as a proportion of fatalities, it is still quite small.

As to whether there is a major problem that needs to be addressed, I am not sure that is the case. As Mr Ledsome said, this is kept under review. As I understand it, the levels of fines are being looked at, although that is a Ministry of Justice responsibility, rather than one of ours.

If we find, however, that there is significant non-compliance out there, obviously, across this Department and across Government generally you would have to consider whether the sanctions to deter that non-compliance are sufficient.

Q213 Chair: In terms of raising awareness, everyone agrees that is a good thing to do. As part of a raising-awareness campaign, should it be clearly laid down for anyone who has a complaint where they go to with that complaint and how they can expect it to be dealt with?

Stephen Williams: Yes, that is a reasonable point. Again, putting ourselves in the minds of our constituents, as we should always do, that possibly is when you would think of Government, and probably local government, first. To follow up on Mr Morris's questions, you probably would go to Trading Standards in your local authority first, if you had a worry about the quality of work that was carried out by someone who purported to be competent and qualified to do what they held out to be doing.

At that point, the local authority would point you in the right direction. First of all, they would consider whether it was an enforcement issue for them or whether it was something you should be taking up with the particular holders of the register, under which that competent person was practising.

Bob Ledsome: Another one of the conditions of authorisation, I suspect, is that each of the scheme operators needs to have in place a robust complaints-handling procedure. That is, again, one of the things we have asked UKAS to look at as part of their assessment as to how complaints are handled.

Stephen Williams: As I said earlier, in the data I gave, both Certsure and NAPIT have thrown people off their register and suspended others. That does imply that some of these complaints are being followed through.

Q214 Bob Blackman: Moving away from the electrical industry, you will be relieved to know, to another aspect of building regulations, can you give us an update on where we are in terms of the housing standards review?

Stephen Williams: The consultation was obviously initiated before I took up this post, but it was concluded while I was in post and we have been looking at all the various submissions that have come forward. Obviously, there are several areas that are perhaps more contentious than others, including space standards and security.

We have been having discussions within the Department and across Government as to what our approach should be. Those discussions are nearing a conclusion at the moment and I hope an announcement about, at least, the direction of travel that we are going to undertake will be made at the end of this month.

Q215 Bob Blackman: The Government originally was telling us that Option B was the preferred option, subject to consultation. Am I correct in that presumption?

Stephen Williams: Yes. The consultation showed the preferred option was Option C, which is moving straight to building regulations. The overwhelming preference was to embed as many standards as possible into building regulations. The question was whether you do it over a period of time or whether you do it immediately. We have to weigh up, as a Government, the Parliamentary procedure for doing some of these things as well.

As I say, we are hoping that an announcement will be made at the end of this month, not just about this particular very important piece of work that the Department has undertaken; other deregulatory and regulatory business across Government will be announced at the end of the month.

Q216 Bob Blackman: On the other point you made about room size and security, one of the aspects that is quite critical here is that the London Plan, for example, has much higher standards than we understand the Government is proposing. The Mayor of London and other local authorities will be forced to review and justify why they want these standards. Is that still the case, from the Government's perspective?

Stephen Williams: Certainly, some other parts of Government are very well aware of the Mayor of London's views on certain issues, and I gather the Secretary of State is meeting with the Mayor of London very shortly to discuss the issues you have just mentioned. However, as was shown to me in a diagram in my first week or so in post, the problem is that there are lots of different standards around the country.

We have heard the example of space. There is a standard in social housing that the Homes and Communities Agency applies to all people who construct social and affordable housing. There are around about 90 other space standards that are applied to the private sector, including the Mayor of London's standard, and consequently that of 30 boroughs in

London, but also another 60 around the country, which means the vast majority of local authorities do not necessarily have space standards.

There is huge variety out there in the market, as it were, at the moment. We are trying to see whether we can bring some rationality to that process, which would help prospective home purchasers, but would also help the house building industry know what sort of standards they might have to adopt.

I suggest that you hold your powder on this one for a little while yet. No doubt you will want to talk about it once we have made some announcements. The first announcement you might want to wait for is later this month.

Q217 Bob Blackman: I worry about announcements being made and us reacting to them, rather than inputting to policy and trying to get the policy right in the first place. Can we be clear, then? The position that seems to have been adopted is that the Government is going to say to these local authorities, “Whatever you want as standards, these are the minimum standards required and you will have to justify it if you want, for example, bigger rooms or more security as part of your requirements for house building in your area.” Is that the Government’s position?

Stephen Williams: Chairman, Bob is now asking me to pre-empt decisions that have not yet finally been made inside Government. Those discussions are taking place as to what the parameters of standards or building regulations should be, but no final decision has yet been made. I hear what you want, but I cannot tell you the answer.

Q218 Bob Blackman: The Government has made clear that it is a localist Government with a localist agenda, but this seems to be a direct assault on localism. It will be that the bare minimum standards are acceptable and it is tough if the local people want a better standard of housing and a better standard of security. That seems to me to be fundamentally wrong.

Stephen Williams: I am certainly a great localist—indeed, I am the Minister for localism, I believe, amongst my range of responsibilities. That would always be my starting point, but sometimes, as in the case of building regulations, as we have just been discussing, you have to have nationally applied standards for certainty of the consumer, but, also, certainty in the market as well.

Q219 Chris Williamson: Picking up on that, there are some who would say the Government has caved in to the house building industry. What do you have to say about that, Minister? Have you caved in?

Stephen Williams: I am not particularly susceptible to caving in to representations from any vested interest. I can assure you we are weighing up all of the representations that have been made, whether they are political, from the Mayor of London, or whether they are commercial, from the people who have to build the houses that we may or may not be regulating in a particular way.

Q220 Chris Williamson: Your previous answer alluded to the fact that you have caved in.

Stephen Williams: I do not think I alluded to a caving-in at all.

Chris Williamson: You did not use the term “caving in”, but I drew the conclusion from your response that you have caved in. You are saying that we need a national standard, but it seems those standards are not of a sufficient level. There is no local flexibility for local people to impose higher standards, for local people. If that is what local people want, one would have thought, given the Government’s commitment to localism, local authorities would have the ability to insist upon that.

Surely it would be better, would it not, to enable that power to be vested in local authorities to up the standard, rather than dumbing down and forcing local authorities to go with a lower standard? That indicates, certainly to me, that you have caved in.

Stephen Williams: There are 336 authorities in England that might wish to apply particular planning standards or to adopt national standards that are available for them, but the majority do not. There are about 90 that, for instance, set space standards; 246 do not. That is the localist starting point that we are going from. I do not know whether Derby has set rigorous standards over every aspect of house building. My knowledge of the circumstances in Derby is not that high, but I do know Bristol has particularly high standards.

Q221 Chair: Finally, moving on to Part L and the changes the Government made in 2013 with regard to the move towards zero-carbon homes by 2016, the last Government brought in the commitment to get to zero-carbon homes by 2016 and this Government has broadly accepted that objective, though we can argue whether it is code level 5 or code level 6. There has been a slight diminution there, but, aside from that, there is concern—the Environmental Audit Committee had a look at this—that the changes that were made to Part L building regulations will make it more difficult to hit that 2016 target. What are your observations on that?

Stephen Williams: I will let Mr Ledsome answer the specific question about what Part L has done, but I will say that, generally, the Government is still committed to having zero-carbon homes from 2016. It was, after all, confirmed by the Chancellor in his Budget statement last year. We are still very much committed to that.

I chaired a committee of the zero-carbon taskforce in the Department last week, where we discussed the progress that had been made in various areas to bring people towards a consensus about what the approach should be, including in the area of allowable solutions. We are still committed to that and we are still working, both politicians and officials, with the private sector and NGOs to make sure we get an agreement about what the actual policy should be before we proceed to legislation. As for Part L, Mr Ledsome can answer.

Bob Ledsome: The main focus of the changes that are coming into effect in April for Part L are about continuing to drive what we call fabric energy efficiency: trying to ensure that the fabric of the dwelling is highly energy efficient and getting that right. That has been widely accepted and recognised as a really important first step. If you cannot get

the energy efficiency right, there is no point trying to put in loads of building-integrated renewables or whatever.

That really has been the focus for the Part L 2013 step. However, it is not only about regulations as well; there is a lot of work going on across industry on issues around the performance of new dwellings. Are the regulatory standards being met? Is that being achieved in practice? If it is not being achieved in practice, what do you do about it? There is a whole programme of work, which is looking at that.

Q222 Chair: The previous arrangement was that we would move towards 2016 in a certain and gradual way. There was a step change in 2010, a step change in 2013 and another step change in 2016. Every step change was predictable, because it had been agreed in advance. What has happened in 2013, as I understand it, is now the step that has been made is not as great as that which was previously planned. That has two problems. First of all, it creates uncertainty, particularly for the renewables suppliers, people in the conservation industry and the insulation suppliers, who were gearing up to a different standard and now it has been reduced. Secondly, it brings a bigger step between 2013 and 2016, one that the industry may not be able to deliver. Is that a problem you perceive?

Bob Ledsome: You are quite right to say that the step that was being delivered in these changes to the Part L building regulations was not as large as the step that was originally envisaged when the policy was put in place. That is perfectly correct.

In the consultation the Government undertook in the summer and autumn on the next steps on zero carbon, as well as talking about allowable solutions, it also asked for views on the thresholds that should be put in place for 2016—for example, anything more on fabric energy efficiency or around building-integrated renewables—so there could be an early focus on those elements to ensure that industry is ready for what may be coming in 2016.

Q223 Chair: There is still a belief and a commitment that in 2016 we will have the zero-carbon-home standard.

Bob Ledsome: Yes.

Chair: There is still an absolute belief that it can be delivered, despite what some people in the renewables industry and the conservation industry are saying.

Stephen Williams: Last week, I met many people who have invested quite a lot of their time, from what they were saying to us; some of the representatives of the building industry, as well as the NGOs, who were at this taskforce meeting, had been working in this area for seven years. The feedback that I heard very clearly was that they hoped for certainty during 2014 that we were ready to proceed in 2016.

Of course, that is the challenge that Government has to respond to. As to whether it is difficult to have zero-carbon living from 2016, one of the points made in that meeting was that, usually, one of the big obstacles is cost. As well as Government regulation, it is the cost to the producer. The cost of many of the measures that would need to be adopted to have zero-carbon living from 2016, whether it is photovoltaics or whatever, has dropped. In many ways, it is easier to deliver that objective in 2016, but what is missing,

and what you are right to raise, is the absolute clarity from Government as to when and how we are proceeding. That is certainly something I hope to bring to a head soon.

Q224 Chair: We had a chance to look at the cost-benefit analysis that was done on the 2013 changes. Apparently, the Government took into account the cost to the house builder but not the reduced cost to the home owner.

Bob Ledsome: In the impact assessment, we set out what the benefits would be of lower energy savings. They are factored in; they are in the impact assessment. We do take account of that. There are rules that apply across Government in terms of the way regulatory costs have to be accounted for, which do focus on the regulatory cost. That is just general Government policy.

Chair: Those rules do not allow the reduced costs to the home owner to be taken into account, but they would in a commercial dwelling.

Bob Ledsome: They would in a commercial dwelling.

Chair: But not in a domestic dwelling.

Bob Ledsome: The metric we have to provide information on is the equivalent annual net cost to business. That is the methodology that is employed for all regulation across Government.

Q225 Chris Williamson: Can I press the Minister a little bit? It seems to me that there has been a watering down of the specifications. You are saying you are confident you will still hit the 2016 target. Could you guarantee that there will be no further dilution of these specifications going forward ahead of 2016, and that that will definitely be met?

Stephen Williams: All sorts of players have to be brought to the table to agree to move towards zero-carbon homes from 2016. Government is clearly one of the players, but the market—both in terms of house builders and product manufacturers, which were represented at the taskforce as well—has to move at the same time.

I cannot give an absolute guarantee to you now that there will not be changes made to ensure we can get zero-carbon homes from 2016, but it is an objective of the Government that we have zero-carbon homes from 2016 and we are working very hard to make sure we are able to get that clarity this year.

Q226 Chris Williamson: That means you will only be able to move as quickly as the most recalcitrant, slowest and unenthusiastic.

Stephen Williams: No, I was not saying that; I was just recognising the reality that there are lots of fingers in this pie. We do not have a command-and-control society here. We have to work with the market and the people who know what they can deliver.

Q227 Chris Williamson: What are you doing to encourage those players who may be a little reluctant to move as quickly as the Government would wish?

Stephen Williams: That is why the Government and the industry take it in turns to chair this particular zero-carbon taskforce. That emphasises the fact that it is a partnership arrangement. Government has set a policy objective: that we want zero-carbon living to be a reality from 2016 onwards. However, we have to bring industry with us. There are lots of players in that area. Putting pressure on both of us, clearly, are NGOs who rightly, in my opinion, campaign for us to do something to reduce our carbon footprints, so that we can reduce the risk of climate change.

Chair: Minister, thank you very much indeed for coming in to answer that range of questions.