

# Building Safety: next steps towards competence



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In 2017, the tragic fire at Grenfell Tower which took 72 lives exposed serious failings across the UK system of building and managing high-rise homes.

Since the Grenfell tragedy, ECA and the FSA have played a central role in creating more robust standards of electrical competence and fire safety, as part of the wholesale review of every aspect of building safety. Almost four years later, while limited progress has been made, considerable work remains to ensure that people, including the vulnerable, are safe in the buildings that we provide for them.

Historically, professionals and tradespeople qualify once and are then permitted to practice for life, without any form of ongoing or periodic review.

However, competence does not exist in a vacuum. It is a continuously evolving combination of skills, knowledge, experience, and behaviours.

An effective periodic revalidation can ensure that the necessary skills, knowledge, experience, and behaviours have been maintained and that built-environment professionals remain competent to fulfil their role.

The first CSG output on standards is the new BSI Flex 8670 – Built Environment – Core Criteria for Building safety in Competence Frameworks Code of Practice, developed following recommendations by ECA and the FSA.

The initial Draft for Public Comment (DPC) closed in October 2020 and underwent

In the months following the fire, former Chair of the Health and Safety Executive Dame Judith Hackitt drafted the Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety to address the many flaws in the system which allowed the disaster to happen.

In her interim report, Dame Hackitt concluded that the regulatory system covering high-rise buildings was not fit for purpose. In particular, she highlighted a worrying and sector-wide cultural problem: a 'race to the bottom' which ultimately saw corners cut on cost, training, competence, and the responsibilities of those building, maintaining, and managing towers and other homes.

In October 2020, the second and final industry report, *Setting the Bar*, was published. ECA and the FSA joined close to 150 other member bodies of the industry Competence Steering Group (CSG) in contributing to this crucially significant report.

extensive review, before being released in April 2021.

### Recommendations

The key recommendations put forward by ECA and the FSA were:

**Use a recognised framework including card scheme** – The industry should adopt a framework for all the installer sectors working on higher-risk buildings that can be applied to other project types. This framework should consist of:

- Accredited third party certification of companies
- Level 2 or 3 qualifications for individuals
- A card scheme such as, but not limited to, the CSCS
- CPD refresher training and the maintenance of individual skills
- All installers have a core knowledge of fire safety in buildings – training to be standardised and made mandatory.

**New sector assurance frameworks** – Where sectors do not currently operate within the above, these will need to be defined and developed.

**Standardised terminology** – The same educational terms should be adopted across all installer sectors.

**Refresher training** – An industry-wide CPD refresher training programme should

be introduced within each installer sector specifying the training, process, and accessible storage of records. Contractors and building safety managers should ensure industry-agreed fire safety resources are presented to all installers at induction.

### The (long) road to competence

There are, and will always be, differing views on how improvements in quality and competence can be achieved, but I would urge those involved to work together to create the sector frameworks that are essential to driving competence improvements.

If we don't, incompetence will thrive, and lives will continue to be put in danger. Unfortunately, the draft Building Safety Bill stops short of mandating compliance with the proposed frameworks which, if included, would be a powerful driving force for change.

For there to be consistency across the construction industry, with its wide array of specialist trades, clear guidance and a national standard are essential. Those who manage, train, and employ Built Environment professionals need a benchmark against which to measure and assess their effectiveness.

Some ECA today readers may be wondering: why is all this needed when

we have apprenticeships for this very purpose?

Well, quite simply, many careers within the Built Environment do not have established apprenticeship routes. For those that do, the Flex Standard does not aim to replace them but to help to maintain competence throughout a person's career, long after they qualify.

The latest version of BS 8670 was published in April 2021 for immediate use. As such, organisations and trade bodies responsible for competency frameworks are encouraged to engage with it as soon as possible.

The new Building Safety Regulator in England has been engaged in the process, and it is expected that the Regulator's Competency Committee will look at compliance against this standard as providing the sector's competency requirements, and ensuring that they are being met.

Workers with a few weeks' training are simply not competent to safely do electrical work in high-risk buildings.

It bears repeating that we are talking about protecting lives – we must work together to put a stop to low levels of electrical and fire safety competence. The human cost of inaction does not permit any reasonable alternative.

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