

BESA: “Heating industry’s lack of diversity is ‘an absolute scandal’”

2 years ago



A collective failure to address diversity means the heating and hot water industry is missing out on crucial skills and putting its whole future at risk, according to the [Building Engineering Services Association \(BESA\)](#).

Just 2% of the sector’s workforce are female and only 5% are from an ethnic minority background, according to [new research from Energy Systems Catapult](#), which is working with the Association to address skills shortages across the building services sector.

The failure to develop a more diverse workforce is undermining attempts to accelerate the decarbonisation of heating and hot water production in buildings and meet government targets for scaling up heat pump installations and replacing gas boilers, said BESA.

“These figures are an absolute scandal,” said the Association’s director of training and skills Helen Yeulet. “We appear to have made no progress on diversity at all.

“The industry needs new approaches to meet its skills gap and embrace the technologies that will help to tackle climate change. A different workforce brings diversity of thought that will be essential if it is to grow and develop.”

She pointed out that many other industries had already reaped the benefits of recognising that people from different backgrounds bring diversity of ideas and approaches.

“Building services continues to miss out,” said Yeulet.

The online [BESA Academy](#) training facility is focusing heavily on encouraging greater diversity of opportunity in the building services sector, but believes the industry needs to make its employment and training models more flexible to attract a wider cross-section of the UK population.

Inclusive

“We must make our industry more inclusive and representative of the society it serves,” said Yeulet. “It is crucial that we shift the ‘male, stale and pale’ image so that we can recruit the multi-background, multi-talented workforce our companies need to play their part in future economic growth. Otherwise, it is hard to see how the industry as we know it can survive.

“We are not fishing in the right pools for our skills,” said Yeulet. “Other industries are heavily focused on the BAME population because they see so much innovative thinking and new ideas emerging there, while unconscious bias means we continually return to stereotypical ideas of what a heating engineer should look like.”

Heating has a rapidly ageing workforce with a high proportion of employees over 55 and has seen a sharp drop in the number of workers under 30. BESA believes apprentices will be a crucial part of the solution, so employers are being urged to sign up to its [‘Future Skills’ pledge](#) and commit to taking on at least one apprentice this year.

“Apprenticeships are not just for young people but are suitable for those of any age looking to learn a new skill and for people from all backgrounds who might not have seen our industry as an attractive career destination in the past,” said Yeulet.

She said BESA wanted to make the industry a place where people with new ideas would feel empowered to make a difference. The decarbonisation of heat is a fast-growing sector where engineers can help to address climate change and cut energy bills for hard-pressed households.

The Catapult’s report argues that “inherent societal stereotypes” perpetuate the perception that the heating trade is only for men, which leads to a flawed recruitment process that prioritises employing more men.

Women also reported that they were not encouraged to join technical training courses at school age as these were “only for boys”; and later in life financial barriers and lack of flexible working limited access for women and ethnic minorities. The report said many people were put off by the cost of training courses and that awareness of available funding was low.

So-called ‘banter’ culture is a further disincentive to people who feel they may be exposed to sexist and racist behaviour in the white male dominated heating sector.

“The median age of heating engineers today is 55, meaning many professionals will – over the coming decade – leave the workforce,” said report co-author Dr Vivien Kizilcec, consumer research manager at Energy Systems Catapult.

“This coupled with the large skills gap means that the heating sector is on a cliff edge. We must tap into a broader talent pool and bring more women and ethnic minorities into the fold.”