

'Diversifying your income' - new seminars from BlueBox partners

We are pleased to announce a brand new series of one-day seminars in the autumn. Titled 'Diversifying your income' the programme is designed to help residential practitioners broaden their earnings.

Concept

The current recession has taught us one valuable lesson: never rely on a narrow range of activities for our income. During the good times, most practices relied on a steady flow (and sometimes a flood) of well paid lending work. Once the recession hit, these instructions simply disappeared. Although this affected the whole sector, it is clear that those firms who maintained a broader, 'general practice' were left in better shape.

Future uncertainty – it's not over yet

The policies of the new coalition government are unlikely to give quick results. The rise in VAT and concern over the national 'belt tightening' may cause cautious clients to defer spending decisions. While the economists argue about 'double-dip recessions', the message for the residential sector is clear: we are not out of the woods yet. Riding out the bad times may have been an appropriate strategy 18 months ago but as reserves run low, many have recognised the urgent need to diversify.

Planning for diversity

Diversification is not easy and it brings risks as well as opportunities. For example, expansion on too many fronts with limited resources will not only result in the failure of the new initiatives but can hurt the core business as well. Consequently, we have chosen our new programme carefully. The topics are familiar and cognate. They focus on established professional roles that are defined, proven, and sustainable. The seminars include:

What's the difference? - moving from the HomeBuyer Report to the building survey.

Adding the building survey to your portfolio of services is not straight forward as it represents a 'step change' in skills and knowledge required. This course will help you do this safely.

What's in this issue?

- New seminars from BlueBox partners
- Rightmoveplus at bargain prices
- CML decision on Japanese Knotweed
- Exploding back boilers
- DEAs fail to identify double glazing
- Radon action and target levels refined by HPA
- Japanese Knotweed - update on new lender policies
- Dates for your diary—where you can see BlueBox directors this autumn
- HBR factsheet - G5 water heating

If you have any comments on this newsletter or would like to make a contribution, please contact the BlueBox partners office on 0845 260 3500.

Bumper summer issue!

Getting the work done – organising building work for your client.

Although we identify repairs in our reports we usually leave our clients to organise the work themselves where they become exposed to 'cowboy' rip-offs. This seminar will give you the ability to organise small building contracts.

Party walls: developing your role as a party wall surveyor.

Developing your role as a party wall surveyor is a big project. This course is the first of two one-day events and will focus on working for adjoining owners.

The seminars take place in November and December in both Coventry and London. For more information on dates, locations, course content and booking information, please follow the link below:

<http://www.blueboxpartners.com/courses/diversifying.asp>

Each seminar costs £170 plus VAT and you can book on all three for just £450 plus VAT. Like all of our events, the seminars are based on projects from our own portfolios.



Property sales data from 'Rightmove' at a price you can afford

Comparables hard to find? Afraid that your valuation will be challenged because you can't find the evidence? In this litigious and competitive world one thing becomes clear: valuers must have good comparable evidence to support their decisions. If not, they are vulnerable to challenge. Many surveyors are still not assembling robust evidence because they do not have easy access to the actual sales.

To plug this gap, BlueBox *partners* has obtained a unique agreement with the country's leading property portal, 'Rightmove'. We are now able to offer access to archived property sales data at a price that is unbeatable anywhere else. We can offer **Rightmove Plus** (which includes the **Best Price Guide** and access to the **Rightmove AVM**) at a fraction of the normal price. This offer is only available through BlueBox *partners* to small/medium sized firms and sole practitioners, and we think a price of £50 plus VAT per month makes this a "must have" for any valuer undertaking residential valuations.

'About my place' RIP
Those regular users of Rightmove will have noticed that the "Sold prices" section has lost the "About My Place" search function which has been replaced by Google. The reason behind this was principally that the quality of the aerial photos is better on Google than it is on "About My Place". However you will not have the Birds eye functionality within the same software, although you can obviously click onto Google separately and use "Street View". For those who got used to 'About My Place' then you can still access it through the **Best Price Guide** on **Right Move Plus** as it is the interactive mapping function on the individual properties (click on a property and when the new screen opens up it will have a section entitled interactive map).

For existing subscribers of **Rightmove Plus**, there are some more changes coming and we will notify you of these in very near future. We will also ask for your opinion on the current system so it can be refined and improved.



Trees, roots and reptiles

In their summer newsletter, Landscape Planning Ltd included a number of short articles that could be useful to those developing sites and properties. The features include:

- *'dummy's guides to both tree preservation orders and reptile protection on development sites, and*
- *working in root protection areas.*

Landscape Planning Ltd, who are specialists in specialists in landscape design, trees, forestry, ecology and landscape planning can be contacted through their website at www.landscapeplanning.co.uk



Root barrier installation in a root protection area
(Landscape planning Ltd)

Assessing older fireplaces

When inspecting older properties, most practitioners focus on gas and oil installations and warn of the potential dangers without even mentioning traditional open fireplaces. However, if something goes wrong with an open fire, the combustion products can be just as deadly as any other carbon based fuel. We have seen this trend in a number of HomeBuyer Reports recently reviewed so we thought it would be a good time to cover a few topical issues.

Exploding back boilers

Back in 2008, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) warned about the potential danger of lighting a solid fuel fire when a redundant solid fuel back boiler has been left in place without being properly decommissioned. If water remains in the system, the heat from the open fire can increase the internal pressure and cause the boiler casing to explode. In one incident, an occupant was killed.

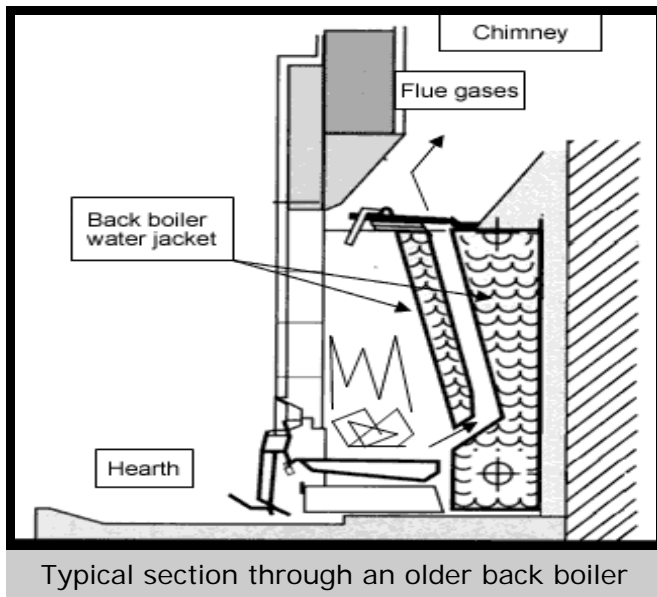
The most common circumstances include:

- Where solid fuel back boilers have been drained down over winter in vacant premises. A new occupant moves in and decides to light

a fire in the open grate before the back boiler has been properly commissioned;

- Where a new remote and separate central heating boiler has been installed but the back boiler is left in place because removal can be expensive. If the fireplace is still there, the temptation to use it will be high.

The current industry advice is that back boilers must be left in a condition that does not allow a build up of pressure (for example, a permanent vent is provided). Even where this is done, repeated open fires can result in localised



structural damage because of the continual expansion and contraction of the metal components. HETAS, the trade organisation that is responsible for standards for solid fuel appliances state:

The only positively safe and reliable way to proceed when a solid fuel back boiler is no longer needed and the customer wants to continue using the fireplace, is to totally remove the back boiler installation by breaking up the chamber that carried the hot water system and removing any pipe work.

Older open fires in bedrooms

Although most older dwellings have been refurbished over the last few decades, a significant number still have open fires in bedrooms. It is common to find the hearths have been taken out, a vase of dried flowers placed in the grate and called a 'decorative feature' in the agent's literature.

The majority of occupants would never dream of lighting an open fire in their bedroom but some do. In 2008, a blaze broke out in a terraced house in Walsall where an elderly man had been cooking on an open fire in his bedroom. He left

his food unattended while he nipped out to the shops and was surprised to find the top half of his house missing when he returned!

To our knowledge, there are no regulations preventing the provision of a properly designed open fire in a bedroom but we think there are so many associated risks (for example, proximity to bedding, clothing, floor coverings and so on) that clients should be strongly advised never to use it. They should also be advised to either remove it or put it beyond use by blocking off the grating but keeping the fireplace surround. We think this is especially important if the property is to be rented.

What to look out for

Here are a few tips:

Back boilers - look out for:

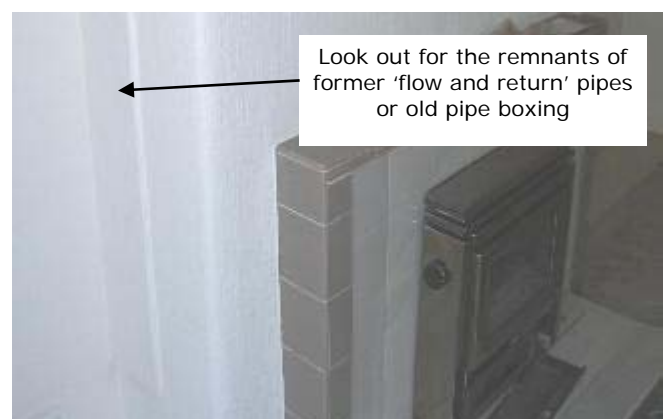
- older open fires and closed solid fuel heaters (Parkray and similar) despite the property being heated by a modern heating system;
- Look at the sides of the chimney breast for any remnants of 'flow and return' pipes and old pipe ducts;
- Old disconnected and redundant hot water tanks in storage cupboards upstairs.

Open fires - where they are in bedrooms:

- Original fire grates that are open to the chimney flue;
- Hearths that have been removed or are smaller than they should be (see Part J of the Building Regulations for current requirements);
- Proximity to furniture, bedding, and carpets and other combustible material.

In all cases where there is an open fire and there is no evidence of annual maintenance, clients should be clearly advised to get an appropriately qualified HETAS engineer to inspect and report on the installation BEFORE the fire is used.

For more information on solid fuel appliances, visit www.hetas.co.uk where you can download the official HETAS Guide.



Claims against DEAs for not identifying double glazing

In their 'DEA Technical Bulletin Issue 23' (May 2010), the National Energy Services reported that five complaints had been received regarding incorrect classification of window glazing. These seem to have occurred where the DEA had:

- Incorrectly classified the glazing. They had seen PVC or other modern looking metal frames and assumed the windows were double glazed;
- Failed to notice the windows were a mixture of single and double glazing.

In a number of these cases, once the occupiers had moved in and notice the discrepancy, they suggested that they had relied on the EPC as part of the property's description and so were misled.

As a result of these claims, NES have issued the following advice to DEAs:

- It is essential that each window is assessed to establish the type of glazing and assumptions from the frame type **only** are not made;
- It is incorrect to assess just a few windows and assume that the rest of the dwelling are the same.

For more information, visit www.nesltd.co.uk/content/dea-accreditation

HPA issues new advice on radon

A new initiative to reduce concentrations of radon in UK homes has been launched by the Health Protection Agency (HPA) in May 2010.

After reviewing the latest scientific evidence and the costs and benefits of radon reduction measures, the HPA has decided to retain its '**Action Level**' of 200 becquerels per cubic metre (Bq m^{-3}) but has introduced a new '**Target Level**' of 100 Bq m^{-3} . The Target Level has been introduced because research has given scientists a greater understanding of the risks to health of exposure to radon below 200 Bq m^{-3} and because HPA now has considerably more experience of the effectiveness of remediation measures.

Although low level exposures can still lead to lung cancer, the risks at these levels are low and can be reduced further by simple mitigation measures designed to increase underfloor ventilation. Dr John Cooper, director of the

HPA's Centre for Radiation, Chemicals and Environmental Hazards, said:

'We are retaining the Action Level of 200 Bq m^{-3} so that our efforts can be firmly focussed on those at greatest risk. However the new Target Level of 100 Bq m^{-3} will enable us to ensure people are aware that even below 200 Bq m^{-3} there are still risks to health and simple remediation measures can be taken to reduce these. The HPA recommends that people in homes where radon levels have been recorded between the two figures should think carefully about preventative action to protect their health.'

The HPA also point out that smokers are particularly at risk at and below the Action level.

Implication for residential practitioners

It seems to us that this has yet to work its way through the other UK radon agencies. For example, the BRE's radon site 'Radon BRE' (www.bre.co.uk/radon/) has the following advice for home buyers if the level of radon is:

'... close to the government recommended Action Level of 200 Bq/m^{-3} , say $150 - 250 \text{ Bq/m}^{-3}$ you should consider taking further action by continuing with the purchase but consider renegotiating the price with the seller, move in and then consider options for carrying out remedial work.'

We think this advice should now be adjusted to reflect the new lower Target Level of 100 Bq/m^{-3} .

It is important not to cause panic by taking this adjustment out of context. But the clear message seems to be that just because radon levels in a dwelling is below 200 Bq/m^{-3} it does not mean that level of exposure is 'safe'. In the words of the HPA having the Action and Target levels '*...avoids the false impression that there is a clear boundary between safe and unsafe radon concentrations*'.

BlueBox partners will keep a watching brief on how the Target Level develops and we will include updates in future newsletters.

For more information, follow these links:
<http://www.hpa.org.uk/ProductsServices/LocalServices/SouthWest/SouthWestPressReleases/southwest100708NewadviceonRadon/>

The HPA report '*HPA Advice on the Limitation of Human Exposure to Radon*', can be viewed at www.hpa.org.uk/Publications/Radiation/DocumentsOfTheHPA/



Update on Japanese Knotweed

In the BlueBox partners newsletter 13, we reported on the controversy surrounding Japanese Knotweed and how its presence can stop property transactions. This short article updates some of that information.

The issue has now been discussed by the Council for Mortgage Lenders' Valuation Panel and although lenders continue to have varying policies, there remains a reluctance to lend on properties where the plant has been identified. The good news is there is a 'general willingness' to '...reconsider applications on a case-by-case basis once remediation works have been implemented.'

What this means in practice is still not known but lenders will typically want evidence that after the initial treatment there is also a commitment to a properly funded and programmed three or four-year plan for management and maintenance of the knotweed problem.

Although there was general agreement amongst lenders, we think a formal joint policy is unlikely so lenders will have to be approached individually.

Over the last few weeks, we have been talking to a variety 'specialist' contractors who have never been so busy and many are shifting their operations away from development sites to tackling problems in residential dwellings. Although the Environment Agency has produced a detailed Code of Practice, contractors are developing their own distinct approaches. Here are two quite different methods:

- One contractor fertilises the Knotweed so it is fully receptive to treatment and then sprays with herbicide. In the correct circumstances, the company claims the plant can be eradicated within one or two years;
- Another contractor follows a more patient approach. The plant is sprayed and the company returns every year for up to four years to retreat any further growth. Treatment is ceased if there is no regrowth for a two year period.

We have also unearthed (sorry about the pun) a whole number of other controversial issues that will make it difficult for home owners grappling with this challenging plant. If you want to know more, come along to the Professional Conferences' seminars in the autumn where we will be presenting a paper on this topic. For more details of the event, please see the 'Dates for your diary article' at the top of the next column

Dates for your diary

Where you can find the BlueBox partners directors during the autumn of 2010

In addition to our own seminars, the directors of BlueBox partners will be speaking at a number of other events. These are listed below:

Professional Conferences: Current residential property issues, autumn 2010.

These popular one-day seminars will include sessions by Phil Parnham ('*Making the most of the HomeBuyer Report*' and '*Can a garden weed make a property unmortgageable*') and Alan Appleby ('*Total recall - recording your inspections on video*'). For more information visit www.proconferences.com

RICS Events: Condition Report Roadshow, autumn 2010 to spring 2011.

Phil Parnham will be presenting a paper at this half-day roadshow that will introduce the latest RICS product. For more information, see: www.rics.org/site/scripts/events_info.aspx?eventID=1568

Trapping the Cowboys! Starring Larry Russen

Unless you watch morning television, you probably missed BlueBox director Larry Russen's starring role on 'The Cowboy trap' on BBC1 in June. This investigative consumer programme tracks down 'cowboy' builders on behalf of disgruntled home owners and Larry was asked to comment on the standard of workmanship in a single storey extension to a house in Norfolk. He gave a fantastic performance (but we would say that wouldn't we) and we are pleased to report that Larry was the only person that wore a hard hat on the building site. The only downside came when the presenter introduced Larry as a 'Building Inspector' and although he has the greatest of respect for building inspectors (especially those who check his building regulation applications) he would have preferred being introduced as a building surveyor.



Larry as seen on BBC TV! Can anyone provide a suitable caption?

G5 Water Heating - reducing CR3 duplications

The new element of Water Heating (G5) was introduced so the new and developing water heating technologies could be properly identified and assessed. Solar water heating panels and heat pumps are just two of the new energy sources that are becoming popular with energy conscious home owners. However, as the hot water in the majority of dwellings is still heated by the heating boiler, we have noticed that many surveyors automatically allocate the same condition rating to both G5 and G4 Heating. This may be appropriate but it can result in some properties receiving two CR3s instead of one.

The Practice Note

This is the best source of guidance (page 58) of what should be included in this element and this is our interpretation:

- Separate hot water heating appliance:** Where the hot water is heated by a separate appliance that forms no part of the heating system, then the heating appliance is assessed under this element. This would typically include an individual gas or solid fuel water heater, a multipoint, electric under-counter heater, immersion heater, solar water heating, and so on.
- Water heated by the main heating appliance:** Where the hot water is heated by a heating appliance that also heats the rest of the property, the heating appliance should be assessed as part of G4 Heating. The rating for that G4 should not automatically be applied to G5 but judged on its own merits.
- Hot water distribution system:** regardless what heats the water, the hot water distribution and separate storage system should be assessed as part of G5 Water heating. This would typically include hot water pipework up to (but not including) the taps, separate hot water storage tanks and associated expansion pipes, cylinder thermostats.

Confused? We can understand why but it soon becomes second nature. We have included photographs of a typical older installation to show how we would assess it. Have you a different approach? Let us know how you tackle the element.

The HBR Factsheet

This month we look at the services section and the often misinterpreted G5 Water heating.



This is an older gas back boiler with a gas room heater to the front. Both of these would be assessed under G4. The photographs below show parts of the same system.

The smaller expansion tank that will be in the loft above is part of G4 Heating

The cold water storage tank is part of G3 Water

Where the immersion heater is for back-up, we assess it as part of G1 Electricity

The hot water tank and the HW pipes from the tanks to the sinks, basins, baths are part of G5 Water heating

The pump, motorised valves, etc should be part of G4 Heating



The flow and return pipes from the boiler downstairs would be part of G4 Heating.

Although we keep cross referencing to an absolute minimum, to make sure clients see the link between G4 and G5, we would include the following at the end of G5: 'See G4 for advice on the heating boiler'

Contact

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