

# ARE ENERGY STANDARDS ABOUT TO TAKE A STEP BACKWARDS?

In light of a rumoured change of direction by the UK Government, *Andrew Warren*, Chairman of the British Energy Efficiency Federation, discusses the post-Brexit prospects for UK product policy on energy usage.

**U**K electricity consumption is 18% lower than 15 years ago. Some two-thirds of that drop can be ascribed to implementation of European Union energy-using product policy.

Effectively, this policy is implemented via two distinct, but related, streams of activity. The first sets minimum standards of efficiency for energy-using products, outlawing the worst fuel-wasters from sale. The second ascribes labels to each of those products, ranging from A to G, revealing likely running costs.

Such requirements are currently in place for 28 energy-using product groups, including domestic products like washing machines and TVs, and business products like power transformers and commercial refrigeration.

For the first three years following the Brexit referendum, every single indication from Theresa May's Government was that both of these successful policies would be continued seamlessly even when the UK was no longer formally part of the EU. So, UK product policy on energy usage would remain aligned with that in operation right across Europe – which is likely to remain UK manufacturers' largest single market.

This continuity would have ensured that the energy savings already achieved would remain for future years. And as new products continue to be added to the substantial list of those covered, the expectation had been that UK manufacturers operating in each sector would continue to make products that, at minimum, always complied with European standards.

It is now becoming clear that this is no longer the policy of the new Johnson-led Government. Initial revelations from respected sources like the Financial Times and the Economist magazine have hinted that the international trade department is informing those in non-European countries that such environmental standards could become more flexible. The EU's chief Brexit negotiator, Michel Barnier, tweeted that this was his understanding too.

Then the BBC's veteran environmental analyst, Roger Harrabin, revealed that he had been sent a formal statement that effectively confirmed that, post-Brexit, the UK could adopt very different, if any, minimum standards for energy usage by relevant products. He also revealed that Downing Street zealots were restricting UK officials even from attending formal EU meetings that were considering future initiatives regarding product policy. This diktat is applying even though the UK is still formally a member of the EU.



All this has considerable potential ramifications for UK manufacturers of any such products.

Even if the UK were in future to opt to run its own esoteric energy standards, that would still leave UK manufacturers severely disadvantaged. It would mean that – to be able to sell anything into the entire continental European market – such UK made products would inevitably need to comply with the EU's requirements. The other big difference is that UK-based firms would no longer have any formal say in deciding the detail of all new standards being adopted. Essentially, becoming rule-takers, rather than rule-makers.

At the end of October, a big EU consultation forum was held in Brussels, under the Eco Design Directive, this time dealing with water pumps. Up until the last minute, it was feared that UK government officials would not be attending. Nobody officially would have been able to put the case for British businesses.

After much strenuous lobbying from the British Pump Manufacturers Association, a few days beforehand 10 Downing Street staff approved the attendance of two civil servants from the Business Department. By that stage, it had been conceded that any chance of achieving the declared departure date from the European Union before 2020 had evaporated. So, these two civil servants were indeed permitted at the eleventh hour to help put across the arguments of British businesses to their opposite numbers from other Governments.

Leaving an empty chair may be portrayed by some as an overt gesture of Brexit purity. Those operating in the real world might describe doing so as another pointless gesture that is truly a dereliction of duty by government. And a giant step back from ever achieving net-zero carbon. ▶