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Builders rage at utilities

Complaints over delays and prices

By **DAN ATKINSON**

SMALL and medium-sized building firms – the backbone of the construction industry – are demanding a better deal from utility companies.

Water, gas and electricity companies are accused of delays and high prices over connecting new properties to their networks.

'There is no recourse to sort problems out,' says one contractor. 'Contacting any utility is a living hell.'

Now the National Federation of Builders, representing nearly 2,000 small and medium-sized firms, is lobbying regulators to impose mandatory rules on the utilities that will spell out their obligations to builders.

In a recent survey, about half the NFB members questioned complained of delays when requesting connections, while about a fifth had lost money because of those hold-ups. Poor communications with utility companies topped the list of complaints.

'Why cannot utilities provide something as basic as a contact number?' asks NFB chief executive Julia Evans. 'Why cannot companies receive a cost breakdown, so they know what they are asked to pay for?'

'Why are companies still forced to pay, in full, thousands of pounds in advance for a service with so much room for improvement?'

The NFB says 'competition is not working to the extent

that it was envisaged', adding that even some independent connection providers were affiliated to big utility companies, putting non-affiliated providers at a disadvantage.

Brian Beaumont, managing director of Onny Developments based in Craven Arms, Shropshire, says the utilities are in a privileged position and they take advantage of it.

His firm was building a house and needed a gas pipe to be moved, but after losing a legal battle with a utility about whose responsibility it was, he was quoted £10,000 to move it. 'When I queried this, the price came down to £4,000 – they told me they

had made a mistake in the estimate,' he says. 'In the end, this job took two hours.'

David Southwell of the Energy Networks Association, the trade body for gas and electricity suppliers, says: 'We will continue to discuss builders' concerns with the NFB. We think we are making progress on the connections issue. But communication is a two-way street. Builders need to improve their communication with our members, and so do local authority planning staff.'

Phillip Mills of trade body Water UK, says water companies are aware of the NFB's concerns and are working to address them.



PIPELINE ROW: Builder Brian Beaumont