

Changing career can be a daunting prospect, especially if you are investing money, time and learning to move into a new sector. The Chartered Institute of Plumbing and Heating Engineering (CIPHE) has put together the following advice to help you transition to a career in the plumbing and heating industry.

Changing direction

Often, it's the case that someone who starts out on one career path ends up on another. We spend most of our lives working, so whether you change career due to personal or economic circumstances you are not alone. It's not unusual to find people enrolling on plumbing courses in their 20s, 30s or 40s. However, for the mature learner, there can be additional hurdles to overcome.

What entry qualifications do I need?

Generally, applicants will require English and Maths qualifications at Level 2. This equates to GCSE grade C - A (pre-2017 GCSE qualifications) or grade 4 - 9 (new GCSE qualifications). A good science grade would also help. The college may ask you to undertake an aptitude test when applying.

Training costs

If you are ploughing redundancy payments, savings or a loan into a new career, you need to be sure it is the right avenue for you. You also need to know you are signing up on the right course.

The CIPHE recommends undertaking an apprenticeship to get the best training for the industry, though due to work or lifestyle commitments, many older learners will go down the college or private training provider route.

Apprenticeship training costs:

If you are going for an apprenticeship, in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland those aged between 16 and 24 won't usually have to fund their tuition - the employer and the government cover the fees.

However, if you are over 25, you may be asked to contribute towards the cost of your training. Some employers will cover this cost, so do ask at your interview. There is help available for the over 25s in forms of loans, grants and bursaries depending on which of the home nations you study in (see p6 for links to organisations in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland).

College training costs:

Mature students will usually have to pay their own course fees. Once again, there is help available in forms of loans, grants and bursaries depending on which of the home nations

you study in. See the *'Further training and apprenticeship advice'* section on page 6 for links to organisations in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Private training costs:

Students will have to pay their own course fees which, as a rule, are normally higher than attending a FE college. There may be help available in the form of a payment plan, or you may be able to access a loan, grant or bursary. This will be dependent on the training provider and your own circumstances.

Work Experience

If you are undertaking a course at college or a private training provider, another hurdle is getting work experience. Many people are caught out by this, as you need work experience to complete the full NVQ Level 2/3 Diplomas. Without these qualifications it will be hard to gain employment in the plumbing and heating industry.

If the college/training centre can't help with work experience, you could try contacting local plumbing companies to see if they can assist. It must be said that the majority will be SMEs (small or medium enterprises), often sole traders. For these types of businesses, taking on a trainee can be a daunting prospect as they balance the time training you up with the benefit for the business. Training somebody takes time and patience, and liability for any mistakes made can be off-putting. Some may welcome a more mature employee who shows dedication, commitment and can be relied upon. Research the companies you are planning to speak with and use your strengths to explain how you will add value during your time with them.

Ask around your family and friends to see if they know anyone in the trade who might give you a chance. If you have transferable skills, such as plastering or tiling, it will put you in a favourable light, as will having a clean driving license.

It might be worth visiting local plumbing merchants to see if they have a notice board. Ask if you can have a space to put up some details about yourself. CIPHE Trainee members can use the CIPHE's Work Experience service to advertise their details online.

Social media can also be a good tool to use. There are opportunities to reach large audiences on LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter. Community Facebook Groups can be a particularly good place to enquire. Keep your post short and snappy, giving key information about yourself, such as the skills and relevant experience you can offer, and if you have a clean driving license etc. It's amazing how many people could end up seeing your request for work experience.

Some sole traders or small plumbing businesses may be inclined to offer work experience, providing they don't have to pay you. Whether you take up such an offer will be down to your financial situation.

Earnings

Another drawback to entering training as a mature student is the money you are likely to earn as a new entrant to the industry. After gaining industry recognised qualifications, an individual in an entry-level position can expect to initially earn around £15k-£20k on the tools. After gaining more experience in the industry, this could rise to anywhere between £25k and £45k. Of course, there are always exceptions and depending on how well your career or business progresses, you could earn more.

Those on Apprenticeships will need to factor in a minimum of four years on minimum wage (for their age). However, they will have far smaller tuition fees to pay and with years of workplace experience under their belts are likely to progress to higher wages more quickly after qualified.

Understanding course Levels

It's really important the learner knows what qualification they will gain at the end of their course and if it will give them the right knowledge, skills and experience to be gainfully employed in the industry.]

To complicate things, just because you are working towards a certain Level of qualification, it does not mean that qualification will make you employable on completion or give you the knowledge or skills to immediately go self-employed. For example, if you are taking a classroom-based course, without adequate on-the-job experience at Level 2, you will not gain the practical, work based competence, experience or skills that will allow you to complete your portfolio or on-site assessments to gain a full NVQ.

The below is a basic breakdown of the course Levels:

- **Level 1** courses are an introduction to the industry only and will not leave you qualified to undertake employed plumbing work.
- Those looking to enter the industry, should aim for a full **Level 2** qualification, (NVQ Level 2 or equivalent), which includes on-the-job work experience.
- To receive the most comprehensive level of training, the CIPHE recommends undertaking a full **Level 3** qualification (NVQ Level 3 or Apprenticeship). An NVQ Level 3 can be undertaken once the learner completes the full NVQ Level 2 - this once again requires work-based experience to complete.
- Those starting an apprenticeship programme in England after August 2020 will receive a Level 3 qualification, plus registration for a CSCS card, as well eligibility for registration as an Engineering Technician with the Engineering Council UK on completion of their apprenticeship.

The bottom line is that you should go into this knowing that it takes years to train to be a plumbing or heating engineer, and most of that time is spent learning the physical skills required to do the role. If your course does not include mastering those skills in a workplace environment, it will not provide you with an industry recognised qualification.

Choosing your course

Apprenticeship

An apprenticeship is a full time undertaking, usually with four days a week working on site and one day a week at college. Depending on your area, an apprenticeship will take between three and four years to complete. Those looking to undertake an apprenticeship, must first find an employer. Apprenticeships can start at any time of the year. Vacancies can be applied for via national portals across the United Kingdom.

For apprenticeship vacancies in **England** visit:

<https://www.gov.uk/apply-apprenticeship>

For apprenticeship vacancies in **Scotland** visit:

<https://www.apprenticeships.scot/find-a-vacancy/>

For apprenticeship vacancies in **Wales** visit:

<https://careerswales.gov.wales/apprenticeship-search>

For apprenticeship vacancies in **Northern Ireland** visit:

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/services/search-apprenticeship-opportunities>

College course

Do as much research as possible. Online is a great place to start or contact your local FE college, technical college, or training centre to find out if they have a plumbing department. If they do, try to find out if they can help with work experience – some colleges have contacts with local employers.

The college will be able to inform you of any required qualifications to gain a place on the course, term start dates, length of the course and costs. Colleges will likely run courses full time, part time and many offer evening courses.

Make sure you know what qualification you will gain at the end of the course and if it will give you the right knowledge, skills and experience to be gainfully employed in the industry. As previously mentioned, technical (theory only) only courses are a good introduction to the industry but will not leave you qualified to work on plumbing systems. Also find out if the tutors/assessors have themselves achieved NVQ Level 3 (or equivalent), hold industry experience and have a teaching qualification.

Private training companies

Going down this route may suit some people as there isn't the 'tie-in' of academic start dates, term times, etc. However, this does come at a premium as it would normally cost more than enrolling on a college course. Also, adult learners often prefer a little more of a 'mature' learning environment, compared to that provided by some colleges.

A word of warning here though – like most things there are good and bad training providers. Even though some will have excellent facilities, they may not offer industry-recognised qualifications. Choose wisely or you could spend a lot of time and money on a worthless qualification.

CIPHE recommends doing as much research as possible before committing to any courses, including finding out about the tutor / assessors' credentials and how many students normally attain the full NVQ Level 2 or 3 qualification (not just the Technical Certificate). Remember it takes years to train as a plumber and you'll require workplace experience to qualify.

The difference between short courses and rogue 'fast-track' plumbing courses

There's a distinct difference between plumbing and heating related short courses and rogue fast-track courses. If you are already qualified and looking for 'add on' qualifications via short courses, such as Water Regulations or Hot Water Systems and safety courses, etc., a private training centre could be ideal. Likewise, if you have experience in the industry but lack qualifications, this could also be the route for you. For those looking to expand already existing skills, short courses offer valuable continuing professional development (CPD) and career enhancement.

However, if you are a newcomer to the industry, then there are some courses to avoid. Some training centres offer fast-track courses to become a 'qualified' plumber. These types of courses will often come from private companies and promise qualifications in weeks, or months, claiming to condense quality learning into small timeframes. Training providers may offer classroom-based learning or home study courses that fit in around your current commitments. Some even claim to have lifelike Virtual Reality content or contractors waiting in the wings to give you workplace experience.

Be especially wary if they suggest you will earn £40K+ as soon as you qualify! It takes years, not months to learn a trade and there are no short cuts. Overall, these types of courses are very big on theory and offer some practical work (normally in the training centre). They tend to be extremely expensive and do not result in an industry recognised NVQ Level 2 or 3 qualification.

Make sure you read the small print, as while some training providers say they will help to get you work experience, they don't guarantee it. Some will only give short 'work placements', which can lead to the student being ill prepared for assessment. Such short placements often do not provide the workplace experience required to fulfil the full NVQ qualification.

Some may advertise the fact that their training centre is approved by an awarding organisation, but this does not necessarily mean that the course on offer is the industry recognised plumbing course that will lead to a worthwhile qualification. Sadly, CIPHE finds itself responding to an increasing number of cases in which people have signed up for expensive courses that do not deliver the qualification they expected.

How do I find a reputable training centre?

Look out for a training provider with CIPHE Approved Training Centre (ATC) status. View our list of ATCs on the CIPHE website www.ciphe.org.uk.

Further training and apprenticeship advice

England

National Careers Service

<https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/>

National Apprenticeship Service

<https://www.apprenticeships.gov.uk/>

Scotland

My World of Work

<https://www.myworldofwork.co.uk/>

Apprenticeships Scotland

<https://www.apprenticeships.scot/>

Wales

Careers Wales

<https://careerswales.gov.wales/>

Welsh Government

<https://gov.wales/become-apprentice>

Northern Ireland

Careers Service

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/careers>

Northern Ireland Government

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/apprenticeships>

CIPHE Trainee membership

Once an individual has enrolled on an accredited course, they can apply for Trainee membership of the Chartered Institute of Plumbing and Heating Engineering.

This will give them access to an e-learning portal, which is packed with learning modules, demonstration videos, literature, and technical information. Leading manufacturers have contributed modules, which cover a wide range of topics, including renewables.

Trainee members benefit from a range of discounts and special offers. They will also be eligible to apply for awards and bursaries. Should Trainee members need help securing work experience, they can take advantage of having their details added to the Work Experience section on the Institute's website www.ciphe.org.uk

Another benefit of membership is that it shows employers you are on the right track from the very start of your career - holding professional development and high standards at the core of your work ethos.

Trainee membership currently costs just £30 annually – this includes access to learning support and delivery of *P&H Engineering* magazine four times a year.

For further details please contact the Membership Department at membership@ciphe.org.uk or ring 01708 463116.