

Help and advice



**Peter Grant on measuring damp**

# The Blue Peter way to verify your instruments

OVER the past seven months I have hopefully convinced you of the value of testing for moisture. There's nothing new in this advice and you'd be hard pushed to find any copy of **CFJ** over recent years without someone giving essentially the same message.

If you've been closely following this series you should be quite familiar by now with the various moisture standards and readings expected in the stages of subfloor preparation. You will hopefully be the proud owner of at least a basic moisture meter and own or have access to a floor hygrometer.

Great! But hang on a minute, how can you be sure that the readings you take are both correct (within acceptable tolerances) and also represent the stable and true picture of the moisture status, i.e. one likely to endure as a reasonably steady state post installation?

Well, if you do no more than simply use the instruments, then the truth is that you cannot be certain. 'But I've only just bought it,' I hear you cry.

It's a complex instrument and like anything man-made it can go wrong or give false readings, just like the LTI 20-20 laser speed gun so beloved of our boys in blue.

It has to be calibrated and checked before and after each tax collecting (sorry 'camera safety') session. If they're not, then those lawyers and private citizens in the know can challenge the veracity of the readings in court and the case will be dismissed if the relevant calibration records cannot be produced.

It's a high risk strategy of course which will mean you will end up with a bigger fine and costs should the speed gun operator have followed procedures to the letter.

There is a similar risk/reward analogy here in flooring. Most of the time jobs go without a hitch but once in a while something might happen after the installation which causes a moisture problem to damage the floor.

As the fitter, you will be the first to be called in to investigate. You feel supremely confident the problem is not down to you or the materials you used.

Why? Because you made the required checks to BS8201, 8203

and 5325 and your readings were all sub 75%, indeed most were below 70%. You checked the materials, sourced from trusted suppliers, carefully, and these were in line with manufacturer's specifications.

The customer is not happy and wants a level serviceable floor, the one they paid for. The plot thickens and the case 'goes legal'. Independent expert witness is called in and verifies that the subfloor is now indeed wet and returning ERH values well in excess of the benchmark 75%.

'But it was dry when I checked it prior to installation, in fact drier than one expects most of the time' you say. Ah, but what do your calibration checks indicate pre and post readings? 'I have not done them, it's a new instrument and still under warranty'.

So, have you wasted your time and money in making these

investments in instrumentation?

Well, if you do not check the calibrations on a regular basis then, yes, you might have! How complex a task is making these sanity checks? The good news is, not very.

**Let me explain:** New instrument under warranty or not, it is recommended that you verify the instrument's WME readings with a check device (normally supplied with the meter) and also its hygrometer functions (assuming it has this facility) either with a reference probe (which comes complete with a four point traceable calibration certificate) or a home spun 'Blue Peter' style check using a saturated salt (NaCl) solution which will return an ERH of 75% at 20degC.

*(If you need further details of these methods, contact me directly 07885 221675 and/or*

*pgrant@tesco.net and I'll send you an information sheet detailing the procedures).*

What about the 'stable and true' representation of conditions I referred to earlier. The answer here is the use of data loggers.

Now there was a time when this technology was just in the gift of consultants due to complexity and cost but things have moved on a pace in this arena and it is now quite affordable for most flooring professionals to arm themselves with these highly versatile instruments which help build a comprehensive picture not only of the subfloor but also the room environment.

I will continue this theme next month. See you then. **CFJ**

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**David Gatfield on floor preparation**



# Cheap and cheerful and you could get an earful

IN my opinion, it is impossible to over emphasise the importance of correct and thorough subfloor preparation. But never one to shy away from a challenge, I'll have a go.

For some, preparation can be the thinnest coat of cheap screed over whatever is left on the subfloor after removal of the old flooring.

Thankfully, to the majority of flooring contractors it's a necessary and crucially important part of the flooring process on which the longevity of the installation as a whole depends.

What's the point in laying a quality finished floor covering designed to last 10-15 years or longer on a millimetre of badly mixed smoothing compound that looks like it's been laid with a shovel?

To compound (excuse the pun) the situation, today's market demands floor coverings that are more and more decorative. Many vinyl products mimic natural materials such as marble or

timber and the effect is completely lost if the subfloor looks like the North Sea, or if every joint in the boards beneath clearly show through.

If a smoothing compound is to be used, getting the right one for the job is of course important, but just as important is the correct mixing ratio of powder to liquid, and applying it the manufacturers recommended thickness as all three greatly affect the hardness of the cured product.

Modern smoothing compounds include true self-levellers for anyone who's not such a dab hand with a trowel. In addition, manufacturers are queuing up to offer advice or visit site to help you get the best result from their products in the hope of securing more business.

Many customer complaints arise from the misuse of latex smoothing compounds. These can be difficult to trowel flat and it can take a bit longer to achieve a finish that won't make you seasick. These poor results are

difficult to defend and it's best to avoid them in the first place.

Latex screed can be finished to a high standard in several ways. Skill with a trowel is an obvious starting point and logically, the bigger the trowel, the fewer the marks in the finished job.

Allowing the screed to set for an hour or so before wetting the trowel with water and going back over the surface with a big sweeping action is another good tip. If you catch it right, you'll flatten the original trowel marks without leaving new ones.

Alternatively, a spiked roller passed through the wet screed not only prevents the formation of tiny craters as the screed dries, but also flattens trowel marks. This is best achieved by one man applying whilst another rolls, a method that has been used in the resin industry on self-flowing systems for many years with great success. Stoning down once the screed has hardened, though a little outdated, is also a tried and

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