

Sustainability - but at what cost?

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Recent national and EU legislation, and the policies of national and local Government, reflect a growing realisation and acceptance within our society that we need to be more responsible and concerned about our impact on the environment

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These trends are augmented by the recent broadening of the idea of responsibility to embrace social, economic and environmental issues under the umbrella concepts of sustainability and sustainable development.

The industry's role in the delivery of sustainable development is, in the simplest of terms, about ensuring a better quality of life for everyone, now and for generations to come, through: social progress which recognises the needs of everyone; the maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth and employment; protecting and, if possible, enhancing the environment and using natural resources prudently.

The construction industry has been singled out as having perhaps the most significant impact across the EU. It accounts for around half of all energy used, about half of all landfill, has considerable potential to pollute our rivers and generate unacceptable noise and emissions to the air as well as generating a lot of traffic.

In order to truly be sustainable, buildings need to embrace the concept of what has been termed the 'triple-bottom line' of social, environmental and economical accountability by ensuring that they, and the neighbourhood they are in, are well designed, planned and constructed in a way that provides safe, secure, affordable accommodation; reduces the need to travel and offers high quality public services. The Sustainable and Secure Buildings Act 2004

seeks to do just that.

This Act allows the Building Regulations to address sustainability issues more fully by furthering protection and enhancement of the environment, facilitating sustainable development, and furthering the prevention and detection of crime.

The Act gives new powers under the Building Act 1984 to improve the sustainability of buildings, such as furthering the conservation of fuel and power, preventing waste, undue consumption and the misuse or contamination of water. It is therefore important for construction designers to consider implementing energy efficiency and other sustainable measures in order to pre-empt the impact of future legislation.

Many of those engaged in construction, and especially the clients who commission buildings, are finding that reducing environmental impact and embracing the broader issues of sustainability make good business sense too. Lower energy use means lower running costs; reduced waste means lower capital cost, lower transport costs and less Landfill Tax. All stakeholders are demanding that the public as well as the private sector improve their practices.

It has been proposed that additional tax breaks in the construction of sustainable homes will further promote the adoption of sustainability. Further incentives could include tax breaks if sustainability targets are met and penalties if they fail. It could mean reduced stamp duties for green homes, support for sustainable refurbishment, cutting VAT for

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insulation, draught proofing and double glazing materials, and the imposition of VAT on new homes that miss targets.

Currently however, sustainable housing in Britain has been slow to take off with several trials showing that such homes cost 30% more than the conventional ones. Most of the extra cost is because the buildings are one-offs where design and construction do not benefit from economies of scale.

Failure to abide by the environmentally friendly legislation can be disastrous. Under the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005 which came into force on June 7, 2005, flytippers will face up to five years' imprisonment and or a £50,000 fine.

There is also the continuing concern about site safety and training. Workers wellbeing, prevention of accidents and site deaths are important aspects of becoming a more sustainable business.

Although dealing with the health and safety of employees may have a cost, not having health and safety measures in place together with the provision of training to employees, means that the organisation neglects its Corporate Social Responsibility.

It is clear therefore that contractors play a leading role in sustainable construction as they are responsible for the physical implementation of new developments.

It is at this stage that, without proper management, environmental damage and pollution can occur, local communities can be disrupted, employees injured and resources wasted.