

Back to the future



As Head of the Sustainable Buildings Division at CLG, Shona Dunn (pictured right) is the first person Ministers will contact for advice regarding any aspect of the Building Regulations. Here she talks to Anthony Woodburn about the Future of Building Control consultation, which officially closes on June 10

Shona Dunn said she is relishing the challenge of overseeing what some have described as the biggest shake-up of the building control sector since it first was opened up to the private sector in the 1980s.

And, she says, the response so far to the consultation process has been overwhelmingly positive. "One or two people have said that they would have liked us to go further, but most people have been very supportive and enthusiastic about the key propositions," she added.

She outlined CLG's reasoning behind the consultation and what she hopes it will achieve: "Apart from climate change, the most important driver behind the review is that we have this massive challenge of building and delivering 240,000 new homes a year by 2016 – and delivering them in a fundamentally different way. That simply can't be delivered without an effective and efficient building control system in place.

"I also want to make it as

easy as possible for the construction industry to know what is expected of it, to be able to gear up to that and deliver it.

"I don't want people to be in a position where they are trying to avoid the regulations because either they don't understand them or they are not prepared for them."

Some would argue these enormous challenges are simply too much for an under resourced local authority building control sector to cope with, but Shona is more positive: "The local authority building control system is set up to be self-financing. In theory, the more work you do, the more money you should get in. And it is designed so that the charges you seek from your customers should pay for the full service, including things like recruitment, retention and training. The Government is not in a position to hand out cash. So we need to make sure the system is working for building control bodies."

However, Chief Executives in local authorities can – and often do – cream off the monies made by building

"THE REALITY OF THE SITUATION IS THAT THE LOCAL AUTHORITY BUILDING CONTROL SYSTEM IS A SELF-FINANCING ONE AND THE MORE WORK YOU DO, THE MORE MONEY YOU GET IN"

control departments for other purposes, and that, according to many heads of building control, lies at the heart of the problems they face – including pressing issues such as recruitment, retention and training.

Shona agrees that this can be problematic for some building control departments, and particularly the smaller ones: "From the conversations I have had there are clearly times when money is being used for other purposes and we can't ignore that. We have looked at some possibilities in this consultation and we will explore these further in the forthcoming charges consultation.

"This present consultation is very wide and covers a lot of ground. We couldn't hope to cover the charges issue in depth alongside all the other issues we were dealing with. We need a consultation paper that is specific to the charging issue because there is a lot of detailed information – both legal and technical – that needs to be unpicked and we simply couldn't do that here."

However, Shona was not prepared to commit to any possible timescales for a charges consultation: "We will issue a summary of consultation responses within three months of this consultation closing. How quickly we make final policy decisions and issue follow up consultation documents will depend on a number of factors, including Ministers."

"However, I am clear that we need to get to the bottom of the charging issue as soon as we can. We have a lot of good local authorities already and



The Government wants to build 240,000 new homes a year by 2016 – another key driver for the proposed changes to the building control system

Climate change is one of the key drivers behind proposed changes to the building control system



the document is already being drafted and reviewed," she added.

Shona prefers to remain positive on recruitment too, pointing to recent improvements in local authority building control recruitment levels: "Many people have told me that over the last few years, the ability of local authorities to bring in trainees has increased quite significantly.

"The information we received from the survey of building control bodies was that the numbers of trainees coming into the profession now is around 4%, which is slightly lower than the CIC recommended level of 4.5%, but a real improvement on where we were in the past.

"Some of the larger authorities, such as Milton Keynes and Birmingham, are leading by example when it comes to recruitment and training issues, but there are also other good examples like Kirklees, who have introduced a new technical apprenticeship scheme and joined up with five other boroughs to come up with a regional scheme for improving

skills and getting people into the profession."

"We have also witnessed the recent launch of a new LABC Training initiative which is exactly the type of thing we need to see to get people into the industry."

But given their financial constraints, heads of building control argue that approved inspectors will always have the upper hand in the market. So how can local authority building control and approved inspectors ever compete on a level playing field? Shona believes there will always be some differences because local authorities will always have responsibilities that Als don't, but there are measures that could be introduced to ensure a more level playing field.

She explained further: "We have said in the consultation document that we want to see as level a playing field as it is possible to achieve. We are absolutely clear that we do not want to see competition drive down standards. Both sides of the industry, public and private, have to recognise that the principal purpose of building control is the delivery

"THE KEY PRIZE FOR THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY IS ENSURING THAT WE HAVE GOT A BUILDING CONTROL SYSTEM THAT THEY WANT – AND FEEL ABLE – TO COMPLY WITH"

of a public good – that's the delivery of safe, healthy and accessible buildings where people can live and work."

"There will always be challenges because local authorities cannot turn down work and there are good reasons for that. Local authorities also have the challenge of being the only bodies that can take enforcement action. But there are things that we can do, for instance, revising the system of building notices and statutory notifications to give more control over how each job is managed and properly risk assessed."

Shona concluded: "What I want to see from this consultation document is to give building control bodies the tools that they need to manage their business in a way that meets the challenges that we outlined earlier head on. I am really looking forward to hearing from local authorities on whether they think we've offered the right solutions to that challenge."