

Living in extraordinary times

It's been a year of tremendous change, both on a global and national level, and everyone in the construction industry, including building control, has struggled to keep pace with it all. Paul Everall looks back on what was, by any standards, an extraordinary 12 months for the sector

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The difficulty of writing an article some weeks before publication is that you run the risk of what you say being out of date before anyone reads it. I fear this may be particularly true this year, for as I write the stock market is falling by 5% a day and we seem to be rushing downhill towards global financial disaster. No-one will be more pleased than me if things have greatly improved by the time this appears.

As I look back on 2008, it cannot be said that this has been a good year for the construction industry. Even at the start of the year there were signs of a slowdown in housebuilding, and as the year progressed this seems to have come almost to a halt in many parts of the country. So far the construction of private commercial buildings and public infrastructure has stood up reasonably well, although with so much public money being poured into the banking sector one has to have some fears that there will be less money available for the latter at least.

And it has been a year of change too for building control. The income local authorities receive for undertaking this service is directly linked to the applications they receive, and if those are seriously reduced then less staff can be employed.

In March this year the Government published its consultation document on 'The Future of Building Control', setting out how they felt the service could be improved. LABC supported

many of these proposals, and will be pressing for a speedy implementation. At the time of writing we have yet to see the Government's conclusions on the way forward.

Another area where change will be occurring in early 2009 is in gas safety. One of my non-executive roles is a trustee of CORGI, the brand name so familiar to everyone for the registration of gas engineers to ensure competence. The Trust was appalled when the Government announced that from next April Capita would be responsible for running the gas safety registration scheme rather than CORGI. Capita will face quite a challenge in getting quick public recognition and awareness that they will be responsible in the future for gas safety.

At the time of that announcement CORGI was in discussion with the Electrical Safety Council to see whether there might be merit in merging the two Trusts to form a single entity responsible for promoting the safety of all heating appliances. These talks have now been suspended, at least for the moment, until the gas position is a little clearer, but personally I still think it is an idea worth pursuing.

Apart from the global financial state, probably the issue of most concern to Government is climate change, and building control is of course directly involved in trying to lessen the impact through the way buildings are designed and constructed. LABC members spend much of their time checking to see whether new construction

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complies with the 2006 version of Part L of the Building Regulations, and we await with interest the Government's proposals expected early next year as to how Part L might be changed in 2010. And despite the slowdown in housebuilding, the Government remains committed to all new houses being zero-carbon by 2016 – and all other buildings by 2019.

In Europe, the European Commission has just embarked upon a new initiative to encourage innovation in sustainable construction. Among the projects included are a screening of national regulations for sustainability; amending the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive; replacing the Construction Products Directive with a Regulation affecting directly in Member States; and developing a new generation of Eurocodes, including design criteria for sustainability.

So 2009 is unlikely to be dull, whatever else it may bring. On behalf of everyone at LABC, I'd like to wish you a happy and prosperous New Year.



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