



A building control system for the 21st century

Anthony Woodburn talks to Sarah Sturrock, Head of Sustainable Buildings Division at CLG, who believes making building control fit for the future will not only help the Government achieve its sustainability ambitions but should raise the profile of the building control profession at the same time

As a 'career' civil servant, Sarah Sturrock must be experiencing a steep learning curve in her current role. Her remit extends through the Building Regulations and beyond, and includes shaping policy on, amongst other things, the Code for Sustainable Homes, water efficiency and how the Government intends to make all new non-domestic buildings zero carbon from 2019.

Four months into the job, she says her department is "making good progress on all fronts".

She adds: "Building Regulations are a very powerful mechanism if you want to make changes to buildings, and so the building control system is an important weapon in the armoury that will deliver the Government's sustainability ambitions. Part of that is making sure we put

the right weight on the building control system, not in isolation, but in tandem with other mechanisms."

An implementation plan that should map the way forward for the sector, and stemming from the *Future of Building Control* consultation, is yet to be published, but Sarah said the delay has been necessary: "The reason why I haven't rushed to put this plan out is because I wanted to make sure that I understood the commitments we were making, so that when we do commit to delivering things within certain timescales, we are in a good position to do so."

"This said, we have not been holding up activity that would take forward some of the commitments that will be appearing in the plan."

"We have work in hand on developing the risk assessment guidance; we are making good progress on mapping the links between

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building control and planning; the work is well in hand on the periodic review for the 2010 revisions to Parts L&F, Parts A&C and Part J; and we are currently in the midst of consulting on changes to the local authority charging regime."

The current local authority charging system is considered inflexible and, in many cases, does not accurately reflect the cost of providing the building control services to users.

Changes are therefore required to ensure better, targeted and fairer charges – as a precursor to moving towards a more risk-based and tailored approach to inspection.

"We are responding to the points that local authority building control have rightly made about inflexibilities in the charging regime which are putting them at a disadvantage, and that consultation is currently out at the moment (it closes on June 25) and I would greatly encourage people to respond to it."

There have been wider claims from some sections of local authority building control that competition in building control is driving down standards.

This, they say, has been exacerbated in the current downturn, but Sarah refutes this: "We do not have substantive evidence that competition is driving down standards. There are a number of people who bring us anecdotal evidence but this doesn't get followed through to raising issues about particular Approved Inspectors (AIs) with the Construction

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Industry Council very often. We obviously take it very seriously and keep track of any complaints that are raised.

"If there are people out there, Local Authority or Approved Inspectors, who don't do their jobs properly, I want them to be identified, challenged and brought up to scratch. Of course there are challenges raised through competition but there is an awful lot of valuable stimulus that comes out of it, too."

The significance of Part L of the Building Regulations (energy efficiency) is central to the Government's sustainability agenda but compliance with it also remains a contentious issue.

Sarah welcomed a recent LABC press notice reporting on analysis of wider engagement by local authority building control staff that showed Part L issues were the second most frequent topic for pre-contravention intervention.

But some commentators continue to cite low prosecution rates as an indicator for poor compliance, but as Sarah explains, prosecutions are really only used as a final resort.

"If you want improved compliance, there are a range of routes to drive it forward. Enforcement is an important part of the compliance process but it isn't sufficient on its own. Rather, we have to make sure that the guidance is clear and robust, is communicated clearly and in a more tailored way, and is supported by good training.

"For example, I am very interested in what the

Construction Products Association and its partners are leading on regarding a new loft conversion guide. This guide – hopefully to be followed by others – will make sure that the loft converter knows exactly what they need to do to comply with Part L and the other requirements of the Building Regulations, making it easy for them to understand what that means, and providing the relevant advice where appropriate.

She adds: "It's about training building control staff too, and developing the advice work that building control bodies already provide as part of their service. It is important to develop the skills of the people that are already in the sector to grapple with the new technologies, processes and systems that are inevitably going to come as part of our response to the sustainability agenda."

It's also about authorities actively considering how to replace an ageing workforce that experience recruitment and retention problems before the downturn.

Sarah explains: "Part of the issue here is how to attract people into what is an important and exciting role at a time when the market is clearly in the doldrums.

"Building control is a sector with potentially long term careers for people – so there's something very important here to sell to people. We need to be looking where we can grow jobs for the long term, the opportunities for young people or for people who may have recently lost jobs, and the climate change agenda

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has to be ripe territory for that. This is a selling point that building control should be using."

Tackling the climate change agenda through a fit for purpose building control system would only help to raise the profile of the profession in the long run, argues Sarah. "We need all people, and not just those who work in the sector, to recognise the value building control brings to the sustainability agenda – that is a very powerful selling point.

"It's also about building control chiefs selling their departments to Chief Executives. Do they [Chief Executives] understand what building control is doing to help drive the sustainability agenda? Is there a way that the experience and expertise in building control teams can be utilised to help make these things happen cost effectively? There is huge potential here, and in the best authorities, that is already happening.

"Yes, a lot of this we can revert back to resources and we are addressing that issue through the charges consultation," she concludes, "but at the end of the day if you don't make people realise you are important to them, then they won't value you enough to put the extra resources in.

"It's about blowing your own trumpet in life and I think we all have to do some of that from time to time."

