

# Building for the future

Anthony Woodburn talks to outgoing LABC President Jeremy Hall about some of the key issues for the building control sector going forward



**A**s Head of Building Control at Oldham Council, Jeremy Hall was the first LABC President to hail from the North West, and despite presiding over one of the most turbulent years in the construction sector, he believes LABC's market position is holding up well: "I don't believe we are losing any ground but we all have experienced a reduced workload, including the private sector. But I believe we have to be optimistic – it's not that our share is down because of a poor quality service, it's just something we have to work through."

"The challenge for us as local authorities is to maintain our resources at an appropriate level for when the market does pick up again, which it will do, but whether that's in the next 12 months or two years, we don't know."

A key sector for LABC going forward will be housing, said Jeremy: "I believe the Government are doing their best to kick start the housing sector and I think LABC has all the necessary skills and experience to take these new initiatives forward."

"Local authorities have such a wide breadth of experience,

so any sector the Government decides to boost, whether its housing, health or education, we are well placed to deal with it – through our partnership schemes if necessary. If a smaller authority does not have the necessary resources, then a bigger authority will help out, that's how the partnership scheme works."

With the scale of new housing development set to soar under new Government plans, focus on sustainability and energy efficiency will be high – and building control have a key role here too, said Jeremy: "It's so important for the Government to keep on track with the carbon reduction commitments it has made and so the enforcement of Part L is going to be crucial."

He explained: "Sometimes local authorities are criticised for not enforcing Part L, and I can assure you that we do, but you do not count enforcement through the number of court cases we bring, we should count it through the number of interventions we make in the building process."

And the Government has an important part to play in ensuring a consistent approach to the interpretation

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of the Building Regulations, Jeremy continued: "CLG has to ensure that the regulations are applied rigorously across both public and private sectors."

He added: "The opportunity with the ongoing review of building control to introduce a robust monitoring and auditing process across all building control bodies must be taken."

The use of self-certification for Part L, he said, could be a dangerous path to follow. "Nothing shows up the weakness of self-certification more than in those countries where they have experimented with it."

"For example, we have buildings that leak in New Zealand and buildings in Japan that are structurally unsafe; the structural engineer or the architect may have gone to prison but if you had invested your life savings in a flat in a tower block that someone has now decided is unsafe because the defects were not identified when it was built, well that's a hopeless situation."

This said, Jeremy says he is the first to admit that the current system in England and Wales is not perfect – he welcomes the consultations on the future of building control and the charges regime: "We want to retain all that is good with the current system rather than 'throwing the baby out with the bath water'."

"CLG have acknowledged that the system is not totally broken. There are criticisms of it and things have to be reviewed and we accept that because that is the way improvement happens."

Jeremy believes changing



Housing remains a key sector for LABC going forward



*Reflecting the downturn in construction activity, the building control sector has experienced a reduced workload over the past 12 months*

the way building control currently charge for their services would be a huge step in the right direction: "We want a fair transparent process where the client gets value for money. At the moment we've got a system based on a percentage of a project's cost. Architects used to work like that at one time but nowadays that doesn't happen because the customer demands value for money.

"We want to be given the tools to give a service that is best value for the client, but also covers the cost for the

local authority."

Looking further into the future, Jeremy believes local authority building control will find itself working more strategically at a regional level.

He explained: "At the moment people are not going to the private sector in their droves because of the quality of the LABC offering and the fact that LABC markets its services so well. But if a local authority Chief Executive decides to trim the building control service in his authority, then the quality of the service might decline and that would

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have a detrimental effect on the service as a whole. That's a scenario we have to challenge, and if that means we've got to collaborate more to create better value for money, then so be it."

Jeremy added finally: "We've got to offer the public a public sector alternative. The public can go to the private sector and they can go to any number of providers in the private sector – but not everybody wants that. If we can make our product better and stronger by collaboration, I think that is the way forward."