



Housing standards review

As the DCLG [public consultation](#) on housing standards is an important matter for members involving architects, planners and building control, CIC is collating a joint response to this document. Members who have expressed a wish to contribute include representatives from: the RIBA, LABC, ABE, RTPI, CIAT and BRE along with observers from CCS and ACPO. While CIC is producing a joint consultation response, individual members are encouraged to submit their own responses.

Kevin Blunden from the ABE agreed at the first meeting of the new Housing Standards Consultation Task Force to act as chairman of this group. The meetings to date, have produced an agreed approach that the overall tenor of the joint CIC response would be that there was agreement that there ought to be base-line standards wherever possible within the Building Regulations. If a higher standard is needed then it ought to be activated by various triggers. It was however recognised that this was sometimes difficult in practice.

The consultation itself covers eight different areas: accessibility, space, security, water efficiency, energy, indoor environmental standards, materials and process and compliance. The format of each section is similar with broad questions of principle first, then greater levels of detail and finally technical questions. The joint CIC response will highlight broad issues of principle. The more technical questions in the consultation are best approached by members who can access the evidence and experience of their own members.

The consultation document is accompanied by an Impact Assessment which includes a cost analysis from EC Harris. There is also another independent report produced by the [challenge panel](#) that was commissioned by the Government. This sets out some interesting observations which look beyond the housing standards review itself.

Site Waste Management Plans

As part of the “Red Tape challenge”, the Government has announced that it will repeal the Site Waste management Plans Regulations 2008. These regulations require those involved in a construction or demolition project, in the UK, worth £300,000 or more, to complete a Site Waste Management Plan (SWMP). If the project is worth £500,000 or more, the requirements became more detailed.

One of the reasons cited by DEFRA for abolishing these regulations is that SWMPs tend to be produced after the design phase, and so only have a limited

effect in reducing waste in the first instance. Interestingly, some 73% of respondents to the consultation on the issue stated that they expected to still use SWMPs on projects. Initially it was planned to repeal these regulations from 1 October 2013 but this has now been delayed until 1 December 2013.

Specialist planning court proposed

A [consultation](#) launched last month by the Ministry of Justice, is aimed at speeding up the process of judicial review. In recent years, there has been a huge growth in the number of judicial review applications, causing the whole system to slow down, despite the fact only a small proportion succeed.

One of the measures proposed in this consultation is the establishment of a specialist planning court to help ensure crucial development projects no longer get mired in unnecessary legal delay. Developers have complained in the past that lengthy legal delays to projects have forced them into financial difficulty and have caused some schemes to collapse completely. Judicial reviews on planning issues are currently handled by the Administrative Court, where judges deal with all types of cases. Under the proposals, the cases would instead go to a specialist Planning Chamber in the Upper Tribunal run by a smaller number of judges specialising in planning law. Similar changes have recently been implemented to speed up handling of judicial reviews of immigration decisions.

The new “planning chamber” is one of a package of proposals designed to speed up the judicial review process and drive out meritless cases which clog up courts and slow the progress of legitimate applications.

Other issues being consulted on in the paper include:

- Changing the rules around who has to pay the legal bills – so all parties have an equal interest in ensuring unnecessary costs are not racked up.
- Speeding up appeals in important cases by making it possible more often for them to be considered by the Supreme Court without first going to the Court of Appeal.

The party political conferences - 2013

The Liberal Democrat party political conference took place in Glasgow from 14 September – 18 September. Less than one week later, the Labour conference was held in Brighton from 22 September – 25 September. The final major party conference was the Conservative conference which took place from 29 September – 2 October 2013 in Manchester.

One of the highlights of this year's party conference season was the Labour announcement of their intention to freeze energy prices for a period of 20 months if they take office after the next general election. If nothing goes awry and the coalition stays together, under the terms of the Fixed Parliament Act 2011, this election will be held on May 7 2015. Should Labour win, the planned freeze might therefore take effect from June 2015 until January 2017.

This announcement is significant for the construction industry in that energy investment cycles are long term and private investors may be deterred by the prospect of a price freeze even if it is only short term. The British Chambers of Commerce have warned that the proposed freeze would damage the government's attempts to attract £110bn new investment in power plants needed this decade. Angela Knight head of Energy UK, the trade body representing the industry has said that "Freezing the bill may be superficially attractive, but it will also freeze the money to build and renew power stations, freeze the jobs and livelihoods of the 600,000 plus people dependent on the energy industry and make the prospect of energy shortages a reality, pushing up the prices for everyone."

The other major policy intention announced by the coalition was the decision to progress more speedily with the "Help to Buy" scheme, in respect to house purchases. People will be able to apply for the new mortgage guarantee scheme from 1 October 2013, although the scheme itself does not commence until 1 January 2014. On this date under the guarantee scheme, the buyer would only need a 5 per cent deposit for a house worth up to £600,000. The Government and the bank then jointly guarantees up to the next 15 per cent of the property's value, in return for a fee paid for by the lender. Only repayment mortgages will be offered under the scheme. There will also be checks to make sure buyers can afford their mortgage payments. As part of the process, borrowers' income will be verified. The Help to Buy scheme will run for three years until January 2017.

APPG report launch

The All Party Parliamentary Group for Excellence in the Built Environment launched its latest report on Sustainable Construction and the Green Deal at a reception on the terrace of the Houses of Parliament on 8 October 2013. While the report lauds the idea of a national retrofit programme and acknowledges that the Green Deal is a "step in the right direction", there is concern that it may not be strong enough to significantly influence a reduction in the UK's carbon emission targets. In particular there are concerns that financially the Green Deal is unattractive and uncompetitive.

Recommendations in this report include:

- Setting up an Existing Homes Hub along the lines of the Zero Carbon Hub.
- Consulting on a new Green Deal which would suit social housing providers.

- Review the financial arrangements underlying the Green Deal.
- Reconfigure the Green Construction Board and align it with the Construction Leadership Council.
- Set clear short term targets for the construction industry.

The business case for going green

A [report](#) from the World Green Building Council sets out the business case for “going green”. It shows that building green does not necessarily cost more if cost strategies, programme management and environmental strategies are integrated into the development process right from the start. In any case, the cost premium is typically not as high as perceived by the development industry.

In relation to the asset value, the report states that in markets where “green” has become more mainstream there are indications of emerging “brown discounts” where buildings which are not green may rent or sell for less. Not surprisingly, green buildings have been shown to save money through lower running costs but in order to achieve their predicted performance, green buildings need to be backed by more robust commissioning, effective management and collaboration between owners and managers.

Smart city opportunities

A new [report](#) from Business Innovation and Skills outlines the opportunities for British business in relation to smart cities.

The term “Smart City” is a relatively loose one that can be applied to a blend of characteristics which involve:

- transport and ICT infrastructure;
- people - especially in terms of an educated, flexible and creative workforce;
- environment – viewed in terms of sustainability, safety, energy efficiency and quality of life; and
- governance in the widest sense encompassing participation, transparency and a long term vision.

A smart city uses intelligent technology to enhance our quality of life in urban environments. Cities can use the data in a variety of ways; to save money, minimise waste, measure domestic water usage and manage transport routes. The BIS report values the “smart cities industry” at more than \$400 billion globally by 2020, with the UK expected to gain a 10% share (\$40 billion).