



Press Information

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Inbuilt welcomes report on improving existing homes

Inbuilt has given an enthusiastic response to the UK Green Building Council's (UK-GBC) report on Low Carbon Existing Homes which was published yesterday, and is calling for the quick development and robust policing of new sustainability regulations for home refurbishment.

Dr Neil Cutland, executive director at Inbuilt for low carbon housing, welcomed the opportunity to be part of the consultation. Inbuilt has submitted 10 strategic principles for sustainable refurbishment (see notes below).

"The report sends a clear message that innovative action to tackle the wasted energy from our existing housing stock is both necessary and achievable", says Neil Cutland.

"The public consultation to follow may add a few details, but the basics are already known. We need to make much greater use of Energy Performance Certificates and their recommendations, and we need to focus on core energy efficiency measures rather than green bling. What will matter next Spring is how clear and decisive the Government can be on this issue in the face of economic recession and 18 months or so before a General Election. The Code for Sustainable Homes gave us bold milestones to aim for in relation to brand new homes. There is no doubt in my mind that within next year's Low Carbon Homes strategy we need a similar set of clear, long-term targets for existing homes in order to stimulate innovation.

"However, we must also learn the lessons from the new build sector – there is no point having good regulations in place to boost energy efficiency if compliance with those regulations is not policed. We absolutely must ensure 'good intentions' become reality."

Ends

Issued on behalf of Inbuilt by Liz Male Consulting Ltd.

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Notes

Inbuilt's multi disciplinary design and consultancy team believe that a number of key principles must be considered when developing the strategic plan for refurbishment activities. These are briefly explained below:

Inclusion is mightier than innovation – Existing stock means there are tenants and occupants who must be closely consulted from the outset. No amount of imposed techno-wizardry will create a sustainable future if the users feel it is imposed.

Look around you and join the carbon dots – There are great ways to link existing stock with local low and zero carbon new build developments, which can help make technologies like CHP viable. Local Authorities (Local Strategic Partnerships) and Regional Development Agencies and Local Area Agreements must play a pivotal role to maximize co-ordination and blending of complimentary energy requirements.

Keep your eyes on the horizon – Focusing too much on immediate measures such as Decent Homes and annual CERT targets can result in short-term fixes that actually reduce the viability of greater improvements at a later date. For example, installing gas condensing boilers during 2008 when a waste heat main is due to be available in 2010 could make later upgrades unlikely for the next 10–15 years.

Together we stand, divided we fall – True low carbon refurbishment will require both advanced fabric improvements and low / zero carbon technologies. The installation and commissioning of these systems can be disruptive so careful programming of works at street and estate level is key to both reduce capital costs and foster a community spirit of 'short term pain for long term gain'.

Minimise to maximize – Whilst bolt-on renewable technologies maybe a public statement of eco credentials they should be seen as the final stage in any carbon reduction project. Improving the building fabric to reduce heat loss and air leakage is of primary importance to both minimize any fossil fuels used and maximize the financial case of any renewables installed.

There's more to life than walls and boilers – The way in which a building's immediate environment is treated can have significant energy implications. For example, returning parking areas back to greenery with permeable surfaces and generous cycle stores can provide the incentive for people to reduce car usage. Combine this with building energy monitoring systems that also relay real-time local public transport information and people's carbon literacy will be increased.

Think beyond the immediate solution – Treating improvement techniques in isolation increases the danger of unwanted side effects. An example of this is using insulated dry lining in solid brick walled dwellings to reduce heat loss. The insulation will unfortunately also isolate the thermal mass of the wall, reducing its potential to help minimize summertime overheating if combined with effective shading and night time ventilation.

Older buildings are very different animals – Traditional construction techniques and materials rely on vapour permeability to absorb and control humidity levels. Insensitive positioning of modern high performance materials can inadvertently accelerate structural damage.

Money makes the world go round – Whether we like it or not, money drives our society. Without clear long term financial incentives such as tax rebates, zero interest loans and guaranteed future energy prices, improvement of the existing stock will be perceived by many as Government targeting the hard pressed individual rather than the more wealthy industrial giants.

Who turned out the light? – Ultimately real world performance of buildings often differs greatly to modelled predications due to the way people act. Clear and unavoidable real-time information within the building on both carbon emissions and running costs is crucial to make people take action to reduce their consumption. What energy? There is a world of difference between rated building energy performance calculated using Building Regulations and the day to day bills that include electrical consumption from appliances as well as landlords lifts and communal lighting. Energy efficiency labelling should apply to all electrical equipment not just lights, fridges and washing machines Therefore refurbishment strategies should take into consideration energy demand beyond basic SAP and EPC calculations, in a similar manner to the definition of 'zero carbon' for Code Level 6.

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