



Long awaited buildings directive creeps towards finishing line

Less than three months from now and nearly 18 months late the United Kingdom will begin implementing the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive despite the pleas from some organisations for further delays

In the spring of 2002, every European Union government agreed to the Energy Performance of Buildings directive. In three months time, on June 1st – some 17 months late – the UK will take the first significant steps towards implementing this directive. Or will we?

The single most innovative commitment in the directive is that, whenever a building changes occupancy, the new arrival will receive an objective assessment of its current energy performance. Together with some specific ideas about what can be done to improve it. Simple as that.

Labelling not a new idea

Labelling buildings for their energy performance is not a new idea. Over twenty years ago, Britain's then-energy secretary Peter Walker endlessly bemoaned the absence of any kind of MOT-test ratings for buildings. Particularly because, then as now, far more energy is burnt in our buildings than in factories or transport.

It didn't happen then. Although his enthusiasm did prompt the creation of a number of privately sponsored ratings systems. To provide some compatibility, the government prepared its own Standard Assessment Procedure (SAP) ratings, scoring homes from 1 to 100 in energy terms. And as the consumption per square metre figures fell even further, 1 to 120.

There has been rather less attention paid to non-residential buildings, with fewer private sector measurement schemes. Effectively the granddaddy of them all has long been BREEAM, created by the now-privatised Building Research Establishment.

At the same time, in England and Wales in particular, there has been growing pressure to remove at least some of the angst from a prospective home purchaser, by ensuring that full information about the building is available. In its 1997, 2001 and in its 2005 election manifesto, the Labour party promised to legislate to provide such a Home Information Pack. Into which an energy MOT naturally falls. One reason that 2002 buildings directive was so vigorously supported by UK ministers at the time.



'INFORMATION ON WHAT CAN BE DONE TO IMPROVE A BUILDING'S ENERGY PERFORMANCE IS A REAL STEP FORWARD'

The then environment minister, Michael Meacher, even promised that it would all be implemented on time, and in full. Obviously this has not happened. Yet. But the winning post is nigh. Even though the compulsory use of comprehensive home condition reports was abandoned last year by the incoming Communities Secretary, Ruth Kelly, this June we should at last see the requirement for mandatory energy information introduced in England and Wales. The Scots will follow suit next spring. As of now, the Scottish energy report remains wrapped up within the (mandatory) Single Seller Survey.

Even now, siren voices are to be heard, including somewhat perversely the Council of Mortgage Lenders, urging that in-

roduction be delayed further.

The justification is the absence of sufficient numbers of trained independent assessors. To an extent, this is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

To date, the UK government has excused its delays in implementing the directive, by arguing the absence of trained energy assessors (the only permitted reason for tardiness). Even though back in January 2005, the assessors' trade body, the Federation of Authorised Energy Rating Organisations, sent a formal assurance to the European Commission that sufficient trade personnel would be in place.

Current assumptions are that in June around 91,000 such assessments will be required. This will increase to some 153,000 a month by October. The number of qualified assessors to meet this demand will rise from 1,500 to 3,000. Of course during the next few months, those offering training to potential assessors will be pretty busy. Inevitably, overall numbers will fluctuate depending upon just how much demand emerges for the, now voluntary, home condition reports.

Reports required for all rented homes

And the directive also requires that such energy surveys will be necessary for all rented homes. Plus for every commercial building altering occupancy. Timetables for these have still to be published.

Providing every prospective occupant with information not just about the relative energy performance of a building, but more importantly what can be done to improve that, is a real step forward. In due course, those charged with delivering overall reductions in energy consumption will use precisely these improvement recommendations, to target grants, tax-breaks and other incentives.

Each will be designed to ensure measures are installed in our buildings, which can at long last cut back on the profligacy which has been endemic in our fuel usage. Obligatory home energy assessments cannot begin too soon. Roll on June. ■

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FURTHER INFORMATION

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