

Sustainable Local Planning

There is widespread agreement about the need to improve the environmental performance of the UK's building stock.

To make this easier, local planning authorities increasingly use national schemes such as BREEAM and the Code for Sustainable Homes when setting sustainability requirements for developments in their areas.

Well over half of local authorities in the UK currently specify sustainable building policies in their plans, and this proportion is increasing rapidly. Most of these are using building sustainability assessment schemes such as BREEAM and the Code for Sustainable Homes (CSH) to help them set sustainability requirements. In Wales, for example, the national government has specified their use throughout the country.

'Improving the environmental performance of our building stock is a national priority,' says Carol Atkinson, Chief Executive of BRE Global. 'It helps to reduce carbon emissions, make better use of scarce resources and provide better places to live and work. The use by local authorities of nationally recognised assessments to improve the built environment fits very well with the Government's emphasis on localism.'

'Improving building standards will also trigger further improvements in the supply chain,' says Atkinson, 'as manufacturers and suppliers respond to the new demands. This presents a great opportunity for new "green jobs" and for the UK economy as a whole.'

BREEAM and CSH

BREEAM is the most widely used methodology in the world for assessing the environmental performance of buildings. Many public and private organisations require BREEAM assessments of their buildings as a matter of policy, to provide a comprehensive and cost-effective way of improving both environmental and economic performance. The Government requires all new buildings in its estate to undergo BREEAM assessment.

The Code for Sustainable Homes (CSH) is one of the Government's key tools for driving up standards in the housing sector and, in the process, driving innovation in the construction industry.

Why use them?

A key way in which local authorities can take action on sustainability issues is to set requirements that exceed the statutory minima. But setting and achieving useful sustainability targets is often no easy task.

Sustainability involves a wide range of issues from energy consumption to biodiversity, each requiring expert knowledge if goals are to be achieved. In addition, different geographical areas may have varying sustainability priorities (for example, an urban authority may have particular concerns about the 'heat island' effect), and different developments have varying potential for achieving sustainability targets – depending on their size and location, etc.

What is needed is a sustainability standard that addresses the full range of issues, but can be applied flexibly to take account of local circumstances. It is to meet this need that local planning authorities use BREEAM and CSH.

Holistic

'One of the major advantages of BREEAM and CSH is that they are holistic measures that look at a whole range of issues,' says Martin Townsend, Director of BREEAM. 'CSH for example covers energy and carbon dioxide emissions, water, materials, surface water run-off, waste, pollution, health and well-being, management and ecology.'

'Another key factor is that the assessment of buildings by BREEAM and CSH is carried out by qualified and licensed, independent assessors,' says Townsend. 'That means that the development management planners in local authorities don't need a complete range of sustainable building expertise, which can include anything from knowledge of building materials – whether the timber is sustainably sourced for example – to surface water issues.'

'The planners can rely on the fact that these details have been professionally and independently assessed. So if they set a requirement for a particular CSH or BREEAM level, and the assessment demonstrates that the development has achieved that, they can be confident that their targets are being met.'

Position paper

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Flexible

Councils can apply BREEAM and CSH flexibly to take account of sustainability issues that they have identified as priorities. For example, they may stipulate that housing be built to CSH Level 4 for most of the issues covered, but require a higher standard in relation to the sustainable use of water. This is a common occurrence in south-east England where rainfall is relatively low.

Many councils also use this flexibility to ensure that their requirements can be adapted to particular circumstances, such as the type, location and size of developments. For example, it may be unreasonable to expect buildings in rural areas with infrequent transport links to score well under the transport section of BREEAM, so lower ratings can be set for this while still setting challenging targets for other aspects of sustainability.

This flexibility allows councils to apply a uniform and consistent standard, while encouraging the local planning authority and developers to work together towards realistic, practicable goals for sustainable construction.

'As recent research¹ from the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) has shown,' says Carol Atkinson, 'the costs of building more sustainably have fallen by nearly three quarters over the last three years.'

We can expect continuing cost reductions and improvements in the supply chain, as well as progress towards meeting Government targets on such things as carbon emissions and water use, provided assessment methods such as CSH and BREEAM continue to be widely used.'

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1. Cost of building to the Code for Sustainable Homes: Updated cost review. Department for Communities and Local Government, August 2011.