

The Code for Sustainable Building

The following people have been entrusted to oversee the future of sustainable construction in the UK but do they have suitable experience in this subject?

- ▶ Richard McCarthy - Sustainable Communities Director General at ODPM
- ▶ Peter Fanning - Deputy Chief Executive at the Office of Government Commerce
- ▶ Walter Menzies - Sustainable Development Commission
- ▶ Robert Napier - CEO WWF-UK, also English Partnerships Board member
- ▶ Ian Coull - Sustainability Forum, also CEO Slough Estates plc
- ▶ Peter Rogers - Strategic Forum, also Director Stanhope plc
- ▶ Michael Ankers - CEO Construction Products Association
- ▶ June Barnes - CEO East Thames Housing Association
- ▶ David Pretty - CEO Barratt Homes

The discussion paper¹ issued by the ODPM contains some strict criteria for sustainability changes in the building industry. It indicates a commitment to reducing waste, increasing energy efficiency and places an emphasis on adaptability and future proofing. But with industry chiefs dominating the steering group, there is a risk that we might just end up with a set of watered down rules, most of which barely address the real environmental and energy problems that the industry faces?

I put these and other questions to an ODPM spokesperson about the suitability of the mix of people on the Sustainable Buildings Steering Group:
What skills and expertise will the members bring to the steering group?

Is the Steering Group loaded to favour 'business as usual'?

The Sustainable Buildings Task Group set up by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) to design a Code for Sustainable Building (CSB) comprises nine representatives of a cross section of industry chiefs, senior government civil servants and NGO's. The steering group has been designated the job of developing a voluntary code for 'sustainable buildings'.

Ben Bamber investigates.

"We have tried to bring a deliberately diverse range of skills to the group, representing private industry, NGO's, and stakeholders."

Ian Coull is on the group representing Slough Estates. Is he there to push better sustainable performance for industrial building practices?

"Yes. We aim to see all buildings complying with the code. We should see industry making the code aspirational rather than an enforced code. However, it will not supersede building regulations. We hope to see aspects of the code backed up by legislation at some point in the future."

Are you confident that the group members offer the right balance of private industry, government representatives and non-governmental organisations?

"Yes we are content that the steering group will provide a robust scrutiny of the development of the code."

Do you not feel that private industry is

over-represented?

"Well it does include the sustainable development commission as well as the WWF."

Are the NGO's there to pass information onto other NGO's then?

"Yes. This group has been set up in part to deliver the relevant information to the other interested parties, including NGO's."

What is the motivation of these CEO's joining the steering group?

"All of them accepted the invitation, and all feel strongly about sustainable development and bringing in a code that will be effective in dealing with the issues which have been highlighted."

The companies represented on the steering group are moving towards taking up more government contracts. Is there perhaps a possible conflict of interest, if the contracts awarded were seen to be increasing?

"I couldn't possibly comment on that."

I also tried to speak with some of the task group members but it was difficult to pin any down at short notice. However, a spokesman for Barratt Homes sent the following statement in answer to similar questions :

“We were very pleased to accept the invitation to join the steering group and we are the only housebuilder on it. We would like a code which achieves the steady environmental improvements everyone wants and which is also realistic, implementable and cost effective. The steering group will consult widely through working parties made up of different interest groups.

“There are perceptions about housebuilders which are way off the mark today and certainly don’t apply to this company. Barratt is Britain’s leading urban regenerator, building over 80% of our homes on brownfield land. This equates to over 200 new homes a week, more than any other builder and which means we are less dependent on greenfield sites.

“We are also very proud of our record of building homes for everyone. We have a long standing commitment to social housing and will provide around 2,000 new homes this year for our housing association partners.

“We are investing in modern methods of construction and are industry leaders in skills training with over 550 apprentices nationwide. And we have won more Greenleaf environmental awards than any other housebuilder.”

From this you might assume that Barratt is confident it is already doing everything that the code might require!

If the code ends up as law in a few years time, it will be in the best interests of the construction industry to ensure they don’t end up taking the bulk of any cost increases from their own pockets. An energy efficient house might well be an added selling point but not one that’s valued yet by many of the major housebuilders. The Greenleaf environmental award mentioned in the Barratt reply above is actually little more than a site landscaping pat on the back². Whilst a commendable achievement it is a bit of

a red herring in the context that we are discussing here.

It remains to be seen whether big changes will come about from the code; unless government resists lobbying from the powerful forces in construction industry that have obviously worked their way into a controlling position. And with massive contracts on the table and being handed out under the Public Finance Initiative, this seems unlikely as the stakes are so high.

Construction industry chiefs seem to be pulling together at this key moment to influence the course that the industry takes and securing positions on this Steering Group is a major coup providing them with one of the best opportunities to head off major changes to construction, and to prevent the burden of sustainable change (and its costs), being carried by them and their share-holders.

If there is no-one to enforce and deliver suitable standards, will adequate changes be made at all; in the short term or the long term? The government says legislation will follow the voluntary code, based in part on the performance of the code. We will have to wait and see if a voluntary code is any help at all. Similar voluntary codes for others areas of government and private organisations have been a miserable failure in the past and many will no doubt expect useless and ineffective legislation if the industry bosses included on this steering group get their way.

Barratt Homes and Slough Estates are particularly well placed to usher in a code which affects them the least. Both companies may be planning to join a whole host of large businesses who want to win the contracts to build new homes (one million are planned), to the CSB requirements (which they will set).

The steering group, in the opinion of a few people scrutinising its progress, is unbalanced in favour of industry chiefs. The list also includes a government commerce advisor.

There is clearly no strong presence of organisations or unbiased parties who might be firmer on the industry.

Ben Bamber

1. Discussion Paper: available from www.dti.gov.uk/construction/sustaincode/codelead.htm

2. Greenleaf Awards www.hbf.co.uk/greenleaf/about.html

CSB is open for comment, questions and feedback:
www.dti.gov.uk/construction/sustaincode/codelead.htm

David Pretty, CEO Barratt Homes

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