

It's the existing stock, stupid!

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When it comes to cutting carbon emissions from the UK building stock, a three-pronged approach is necessary. The first priority is de-carbonising the grid. The second is all about promoting low and zero carbon new build. And the third requires a coordinated national strategy to radically improve the performance of existing buildings.

The Renewable Energy Strategy announced by the Government this summer is great news for the first priority – it takes us an exciting next step towards a truly low-carbon UK.

Previously announced initiatives such as the Code for Sustainable Homes and targets for zero carbon new school buildings by 2016 are already going some way towards addressing the second priority.

But what about the third part of the package? Sadly we still do not have a coherent and effective strategy to deal with the huge energy wastage in the existing building stock.

Why does this matter so much?

Well, consider that over 80% of the 2025 building stock has already been built. The vast majority of the buildings we will still be using in 20 years' time lack sufficient insulation, heating controls or other measures to save energy - and that puts us among the worst performing countries in Europe.

This issue has been identified time and again as the single most important and potentially effective area where UK carbon emissions could be slashed. All experts and informed commentators are united.

To paraphrase the Bill Clinton advertising slogan, "It's the existing stock, stupid."

There is even considerable consensus on what needs to be done, especially now that we have a fully operational energy rating and certification scheme in place that includes identification of cost-effective energy efficiency measures for all buildings. The favoured ways to encourage a green refurbishment and retrofit of existing buildings are already well known. We're talking about a package of measures, mainly financial, to act as an incentive to action.

The options include changes to VAT to encourage more refurbishment, more capital allowances and various tax-neutral rebates associated with stamp duty, council tax, business rates or corporation tax to reward the implementation of improvement measures recommended in an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) or Display Energy Certificate (DEC).

Most people support obligations on energy suppliers, minimum carbon standards for building work and consequential improvements, and targeted support for people in fuel poverty.

Wrap it all up with more joined-up Government (and a Government which leads by example), plus much better communication and advice to achieve genuine sustainability, and there you have it.

At Inbuilt, we work together with our clients to find natural solutions to reduce our dependence on energy-intensive systems. There are so many opportunities offered by nature to ventilate, heat, cool and illuminate our buildings, and cost savings to be made by designing out unnecessary technical complexity in both newbuild and refurbishment projects.

However, one of the most important keys to achieving successful sustainability within the existing stock lies in the way that tenants, occupiers and their facilities management advisers are involved from the outset. No amount of imposed techno wizardry will create a sustainable future if the users feel it is imposed. Also it's vital to keep the specification of energy plant and equipment simple.

Designing-out technical complexity is a real challenge, but avoiding unmanageable complexity is often the key to achieving comfort conditions, coupled with economic operating costs and low carbon emissions.

The Government has shown strong leadership in its development of policies for new homes, schools and commercial buildings. Now is the time to get moving on implementing a bold strategy for the existing stock.