



WHO'S WATCHING THE WATCHMEN?

Open mike The government's consultation on the future of building control has ignored the ridiculous anomalies that exist between private and public sector inspectors, says David Strong

It's a truth universally acknowledged that building control isn't functioning as well as it could. The common perception is that compliance standards are variable, particularly when it comes to Part L, that there are different levels of consumer protection depending on which sort of checking body does the work – local authority or private sector approved inspectors (AIs) – and that both public and private sectors behave unethically and anti-competitively as they slog it out for market share.

There are many sensible recommendations for improving the way building control bodies could work in the government's consultation, the Future of Building Control, which ended on 10 June. But many observers feel that it hasn't addressed the most important issues.

What's conspicuously missing so far are any substantive recommendations associated with ensuring that all building control officers and AIs are suitably qualified and operate within an audited framework that delivers consistently high standards.

As someone with no commercial or vested interest in building control – just a passionate commitment to achieving sustainability in the built environment – there are some important messages I'd like to send back to the government. I was fortunate enough to chair the non-partisan Quality of Life Challenge group that looked at these issues for the Conservatives last year and I have heard evidence from many sides. The findings and recommendations were included in the Blueprint for a Green Economy report, which was published in September 2007. It showed that there are some big opportunities here.

The first and most important is to get rid of the two-tier system and ridiculous anomalies between local authority teams and AIs. All local authority building control officers and AIs should be equally competent and all building control bodies should have satisfactory processes and procedures in place for delivering a quality assured service.

There is little point in tinkering with the

mechanisms of the building control function until all individuals involved in delivery are operating to common standards, within a robust quality assurance framework. One way to achieve this is to require these people to become licensed building inspectors (LBIs). To become an LBI, existing building control officers and AIs would need to join an approved, UKAS-regulated competent person scheme – and to do so, they would need to demonstrate that they were suitably qualified. They would have to commit to CPD and regular training on new technical areas such as renewable energy technologies. They would also have to sign up to a code of conduct and adopt robust quality assurance procedures that would include random auditing of their work. KPIs would be measured on a regular basis.

The Roman poet Juvenal first posed the question, "Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?" – in other words, "Who watches the watchmen?" Unless this issue is resolved, my fear is that the profession will continue to be bedevilled by accusations of inconsistent quality and poor compliance and reporting.

Encouragingly, some parts of the building control world are also calling for change. But regrettably, many of the recommendations contained in the Blueprint for a Green Economy report were dismissed out of hand or deliberately misrepresented by the local authority representatives. The suggestion that the recommendations would lead to a chaotic self-certification free-for-all was a travesty.

In fact, the recommendations provide opportunities for all parts of the building control community. They are also a call to action for anyone concerned about how we are going to comply with increasingly complex regulations to build the safe, healthy and sustainable buildings of the future.

David Strong is the chief executive of Inbuilt Consulting and chairman of the Quality of Life Challenge built environment group

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