

Of all industries in the UK, construction is the one that could have the greatest impact on sustainability. Its contribution extends far and wide, stretching from what is built to how it is built, where it is built and why it is built – all of which have a huge impact on sustainable development.

While some sectors and companies are taking a strong lead on the issue, others are sitting back and waiting. But this is not something that will simply go away, and ignoring the issue is not an option; policy and legislation is starting to force clients, designers and contractors to adopt a more sustainable approach – and increasing client and consumer interest is adding to the pressure for change.

Long term

It is easy to feel overwhelmed by sustainability, and there are a lot of misconceptions, particularly that it is expensive to be sustainable.

It is true that while the cost of initial building that incorporates a sustainable approach may be higher, over the longer term the lower running costs means it can be much better value.

According to a survey by ConstructionSkills, the Sector Skills Council for the construction industry, more than 60% of clients stated that they are involved in some way in sustainable development. While cost is still the main driver for the specification of many projects, a move towards greater sustainability in construction is seen as inevitable.

The Government, the industry's largest client, has recently committed to making its estate carbon neutral by 2012.

The public sector is clearly already leading the way, with 66% of public sector work currently incorporating sustainable development, according to the ConstructionSkills survey of clients, designers and contractors. At the other end of the scale, only 46% of those surveyed said that the issue was being addressed in private domestic work.

The split between largescale public work and small-scale domestic work is reflected in the size of firms carrying out building operations; more than 80% of large firms surveyed were involved in sustainable development, compared with 47% of smaller businesses.

But – and this is where the real problem occurs – the research showed that a high proportion of the organisations surveyed believed they had the skills necessary to deliver sustainable development, but far fewer than that were actually doing it.

Across the client, designer and construction sectors, more than 50% of those questioned said they had the economic, environmental and social skills required to deliver sustainable construction. But a much lower proportion of those said they practised those skills on more than half the projects – 38% of contractors and 47% clients.

Few of those questioned incorporate sustainable development into business planning documents. In an age when firms are often trying to add value, the research found that few measured the value or benefits of sustainable development.

While many firms acknowledge that this failure to measure benefits is a weak link, it is crucial if contractors are to see a return for their efforts and to steal a march on their competitors.

Commitment

A good example of where things are going is London's 2012 Olympics. The project has a £10bn spend over five years, and is being set up as an industry exemplar scheme with sustainability and commitment to people as two of its core values.

Part of London's successful bid was the promise that 2012 would be a 'one planet' Olympics, with an overarching sustainable development strategy, a sustainability action plan for each project, and incorporating targets within each contract.

The 2012 Construction Commitments, which have been drawn up by the Strategic Forum's Olympic Task Group, enshrine this approach. They promise to "incorporate best practice approaches to resource use, waste minimisation, low-carbon performance, employment,

training and community engagement” as well as talking about protecting and enhancing the local environment and ensuring a sustainable employment legacy after the Games have finished.

The development of National Skills Academies for Construction (NSAfC) – which delivers project-specific training on site – will be central to London 2012. ConstructionSkills will be delivering training on site to help develop skills and, more importantly, offering a mechanism to train local people in partnership with employers, colleges and development agencies. But the Commitments don’t just cover the Olympics; there are moves afoot to ensure that they are adopted across all public sector work, and the Strategic Forum is keen to ensure that all firms sign up to them.

If the 2012 Commitments are to be adopted on a much wider scale, how will the construction industry ensure that it meets these sustainability standards?

ConstructionSkills has been working to develop a sustainable development action plan – Built to Last – that will help the sector move forward and deliver these aims. It sets out the priorities for action and the timescales for tackling them, and includes the development on skills, best practice and communication initiatives throughout the supply chain.

The right skills

Developing the right skills to deliver sustainability is the key to success.

ConstructionSkills has also drawn up a detailed skills matrix and diagnostic tool, identifying primary roles across all areas of the built environment.

The skills matrix will be used to review and crossrefer national occupational standards, and it will also form a key part the curriculum for the new Diploma in Construction and the Built Environment, which will be available to 14- to 19-year olds from 2008.

The National Construction College (NCC) has also developed a suite of courses that will help the sector to deliver sustainable development while the skills diagnostic tool is also available for

companies to use to assess their skills requirements from grassroots level to management.

The NCC has been working closely with the Environmental Consultancy of the University of Sheffield (ECUS) to develop and deliver the courses, which include an introduction to sustainable construction for site supervisors, sustainability in construction management, and a foundation in sustainable construction as well as a course on onsite management of waste, water and energy.

The ability to offer a well thought through approach to sustainable development is critical for the industry, especially with clients increasingly driving the agenda. Making it work throughout the life of a project will depend on everyone involved working in an integrated way from the start, with one common goal: to deliver a building or civil engineering project to sustainable standards.

If everyone can be involved in what is built, how it is built, where it is built and why it is built, it will mean that sustainable development becomes the norm rather than a nice-to-have optional extra.