

Since it was developed to support the Urban Task Force's Land Condition Record in 1999, the Specialist in Land Condition (SiLC) certification has evolved into a stand-alone qualification of notable resonance in the brownfield industry and one capable of commanding considerable respect.

It is not hard to see why.

Run by a professional technical panel (PTP), with the secretariat provided by the Institution of Environmental Management and Assessment (IEMA), SiLC operates under the aegis of the Royal Society of Chemists (RSC), the Chartered Institution of Water and Environmental Management (CIWEM), the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS), the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, the Geological Society, the Association of Geotechnical and Geo-environmental Specialists (AGS) and the Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE).

Clearly, this is not just some superfluous addendum to the business card; this is the real deal – the only professional qualification of its type for experienced individuals working with land condition. In terms of reach it is arguably in its infancy, but it has already created a significant platform upon which the land assessment experts of tomorrow can be staunchly ratified.

With only 100 or so SiLC members throughout the UK and an estimated 300,000ha of contaminated land to contend with (Environment Agency figures), they certainly have a lot of ground to cover – literally.

The relative dearth of SiLC members is partly explained by a lack of cohesive financial and governmental backing to date, and partly by the fact that it is no walk in the park to become certified. The breadth of knowledge and experience that is required by the SiLC exam and its concomitant assessment criteria are the most rigorous in existence – as reflected by last year's pass rate of 35%. Graduates truly are the brownfield equivalent of SAS troops: to wit, we desperately need more recruits (not to mention a military-sized budget!) or the impact that SiLC might have on the UK's overwhelming waste legacy might never reach its full potential.

At RSK we are utterly committed to the promotion of SiLC as a yardstick of industry excellence,

both within and outside our company. With one of the original PTP members (Mike Summersgill) on our books, a former guinea pig from the inaugural round of SiLC exams (myself), two recent graduates and two employees currently swotting for their exams, we know enough about the certification's benefits to business and organisations to trumpet its virtues.

In 2004 a House Builders' Federation document entitled *A Way Forward* suggested that certification to a standard of SiLC's stature would be a highly progressive step forward for land assessment. After liaising with the Remediation Licensing Task Force, the proposal was assimilated into English Partnerships' National Brownfield Strategy, where it explicitly states: "...funding should be made available by government to secure expansion of the Specialist in Land Condition (SiLC) scheme and to enable development of education and training courses."

Presiding over the National Brownfield Strategy is English Partnerships' Paul Syms, whose opposite number in the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) is Mark Rolls, who serendipitously happens to be the chair of the SiLC professional technical panel. This in itself is perhaps reason for optimism.

Outside of think-tank, governmental and specialist organisation circles, SiLC has been gaining a momentum of its own in recent years by appearing on the wish list of major developers such as National Grid Properties during the consultant evaluation process. Local authorities are getting in on the act too.

In 2005, RSK was employed by Vale Royal Borough Council to investigate land at a housing estate in Northwich, Cheshire, following the deaths of two young children from acute myeloid leukaemia – an exceptionally rare strain of the disease that, in striking twice in the same place, had raised serious questions about possible site contamination.

At a time when nothing but the best would suffice, Vale Royal Borough Council's policy of working only with SiLC-certified land assessors was undeniably instrumental in gaining the trust of the residents. The land was eventually declared contaminated (though the discovered gases have not been connected to the deaths) and mitigation measures have been put in place. Interestingly, the site is one of only a few in the UK where Part IIA determination has progressed to successful remediation with a resolution of real problems.

Significant brownfield development opportunities and challenges become more apparent with each passing year – a result of structural changes in the economy unlocking large tracts of land, and a multitude of complex social changes leading to the need for an extra 2.4 million new homes in the next two decades in England alone. With development set to go into overdrive, the safety of the eventual and adjacent residents must be assured. SiLC might not be the ultimate solution but, as experience bears witness, it certainly helps.