

The S-word

Sustainability. Everybody seems to be buying into it now. Whether you agree with the science hardly matters. The consensus is that carbon dioxide emissions contribute to global warming, and the legal cogs have been well and truly set in motion.

The intention

The Government intends to deliver substantial reductions in carbon dioxide emissions by encouraging sustainable development across the whole “life-cycle” of buildings, starting with the planning and construction stages, through to the way in which buildings are used and occupied.

The Government’s target, as published in the Department of Communities and Local Government’s policy statement on 23 July 2007, is that all new homes in England and Wales should be “zero carbon” by 2016. That is, there should be zero net emissions of carbon dioxide for all energy used over the course of the year. The Government is proposing to do this by progressively tightening requirements in the Building Regulations so that all new homes emit 25% less carbon dioxide by 2010, 44% less by 2013 and 0% by 2016.

The law

The Energy Performance of Buildings Directive (2002/91/EC) and its implementing regulations in the UK, are the main legal drivers. The requirements are that:

- New buildings, and large buildings subject to renovations, meet certain minimum energy performance requirements;
- Energy performance certificates (EPCs) should be made available to prospective buyers and tenants whenever a building is constructed, sold or let; and
- Regular inspections of boilers and air conditioning systems should be carried out.

The minimum energy performance requirements have been implemented through changes to the Building Regulations 2000 (which came into force on 6 April 2006) including requirements that buildings be better insulated and make more use of efficient heating and lighting systems and use of low carbon fuels and heating appliances.

The requirements in respect of EPCs in the energy performance buildings directive have been partially implemented through the Home Information Pack Regulations 2006 although the remainder of the requirements in respect of EPCs remain to be implemented into UK law.

The response

A number of house builders are responding to the inevitable by testing new technologies so that their customers do not have to carry out remedial works in a few years time.

Gordon Brown announced last December that newly built zero carbon homes would be exempt from stamp duty until April 2010. A rather hollow offer given that the handful of carbon neutral developments in existence have run into teething problems. It is unfortunate, but the likelihood of the market being flooded with zero carbon homes in the next three years is at best slim.



But there is hope. “LightHouse” the UK’s first net zero carbon house was unveiled at an event hosted by Building Research and Consultancy (BRE) in Watford earlier this year.

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