

The Great British Refurb

Deceuninck Technical Manager Mark Barsby, urges the industry to reply to latest proposals on how the Government plans to upgrade the existing housing stock to use less energy and cut green house gas emissions

It may have escaped your attention, but on 12 February, Ed Miliband who is the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change launched the latest Government proposals for turning our existing housing stock into low carbon and low energy paradises.

These proposals may have far reaching consequences affecting us all either as home owners or more significantly as business owners and employees. So as part of one of the industries that offer products which can help to reduce carbon dioxide emissions from our existing buildings by up to one fifth, the proposals should be good news ... or so you would have thought. But like so many other recent Government initiatives that aim to cut our dependence as a nation on so called 'dirty' energy derived from the burning of fossil fuels, once again it would appear that thermally efficient windows and glazing have been overlooked and not deemed worthy enough of joining the 'green revolution'.

So, 'no change there' I hear you cry and already I can feel that you are contemplating the relevance of this text and whether your time maybe better spent watching paint dry or grass grow or simply moving onto the next article.

Not being a usual contributor to the industry trade press, I was initially inspired to write this article after a visit to the ECO-Build exhibition which took place at Earls Court 3-5 March. After being attracted to attend a seminar titled 'Refurbishment Rises to the Top' because the title suggested it may be of some use but primarily because I was star-struck that Kevin McCloud (of Grand Designs fame) was part of the panel of experts who were armed with the task of how to inspire people to make their homes more energy efficient. However, I was taken aback by the number of attendees; people were quite literally standing in the aisles to listen and get involved with this engaging debate, which I am sure was due in part to the attraction of the main draw but also from the calibre of the audience's questions which proved there are many anoraks just like myself out there. (For any anoraks interested the seminar can be viewed at <http://www.ukqbc.org> and all seminars which took place at Eco-Build 2009 are available at <http://www.ecobuild.co.uk/page.cfm/Action=Form/formID=26/nocache=true>)

It was at this seminar that I learned some of the detail regarding The Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) consultation on Heat and Energy Saving Strategy (HES) which runs from 12 February and closes on 8 May 2009. Both Kevin McCloud and Paul King (Chairman of UK Green Building Council) outlined some of the initiatives covered in the consultation and importantly made reference to the fact that bodies like English Partnerships (now part of The Homes and Communities Agency –HCA) needed to loosen their stance and encourage more use of double glazing that can contribute to reducing energy use and cutting CO₂ emissions.

After attending a further seminar that day where ‘Cool Kev’ introduced Joan Ruddock Under Secretary of State who is responsible for co-coordinating many Government green initiatives. She explained HES in much more detail, a summary of which includes :-

- By 2015 all homes are to have cavity wall and loft insulation where practical and by 2030 they will have received a whole house package which includes cost effective energy saving measures including renewable heat and electricity.
- Comprehensive and widespread availability of home energy advice from accredited advisors.
- Consideration of the delivery model needed and coordination of how best to roll out improvements.
- Investigation into widening the requirements under Building Regulations that may require energy saving measures to be carried out along side certain types of building work.
- Development of financial support packages, possibly available through energy providers, so that people can make energy saving improvements to their homes in the short term but repay loans out of the savings that they make through using less energy over the longer term. This may also include loans which are taken out against the property rather than by the individual so that people are not discouraged from making improvements because they may want or need to move house in the future.
- Taken together these proposals could expect to reduce annual CO₂ emissions by 44 million tonnes by 2020 which is a reduction of 30% on 2006 levels with an aim for emissions to be approaching Zero by 2050 for existing buildings.

When announcing these proposals back in February, Ed Miliband labeled HES as ‘The Great British Refurb’. Likening the massive task to when Britain harnessed the discovery of natural gas in the North Sea and as a nation we embarked on modifying 32 million appliances in 14 million homes so that they were able to take advantage of this natural resource. This process took a little over 10 years spanning the 1960s and 70s. He went onto say that an operation of this magnitude will be required again to ensure that every house in every area can take advantage of the many low carbon technologies and insulating products available. To carry out these ambitious plans, Government would be looking to co-operation and the ingenuity from the private sector as well as engaging with local authorities and communities.

I find it somewhat ironic that it is the dwindling availability of this very resource and the real prospect of the UK becoming a net importer of fossil fuels in the near future that this was used as an example.

Whilst being captured by this ambitious strategy, my initial enthusiasm had begun to turn to despair as once again it appeared that the window/glazing industry was being left out in the cold (forgive the pun) with regard to these proposals. However the good thing about open Government consultations such as HES is exactly that – they are open consultations and we – The Great British Public are able to comment and reply to these proposals as individuals or as businesses. I know that as an industry we have been no strangers in contributing to the green debate in recent times, most notably when we were galvanised by Andy Jones of Edgetech, who raised a petition on the Prime Minister’s website proposing to cut VAT to 5% on energy efficient windows. This petition was later presented to the House of Commons by The Right Honorable Bob Spink MP in October last year. As I write this piece, it has been reported that European Finance Ministers have voted to remove an obstacle that would allow EU member states to cut VAT at local level to assist companies and maintain jobs during the economic downturn. This has always been a stumbling block in the past as The Chancellor Alistair Darling and his predecessor Gordon Brown had indicated that their hands were tied due to EU laws.

It would seem that once again the loft and cavity wall insulation industries have influenced and lobbied in all the right places and they will continue to benefit from these proposals, whilst our own industry, represented by our trade associations, appear not to be making the right connections.

That is why I would urge everyone connected to this great industry to log onto www.decc.gov.uk/en/content/cms/consultations/open/open.aspx and reply to the HES Consultation and have your say. And don’t forget to include why Energy Saving Windows should be included in the Government proposals, can we afford not to? There are 29 detailed questions that require a response. Don’t leave it to someone else to do for you and please do it before as the consultation closes on 8 May 2009. As an industry we are fighting for our very survival, numerous companies are experiencing the full effects of this recession and as a result may not be around long enough to see a recovery. In my 20+ years in this industry I have seen many ride the wave the replacement window boom has bought. But we have seen the decline of this market sector in recent years and for some, since the economy went into meltdown, the phone has simply stopped ringing. Industry analysts have indicated that the 2nd time replacement market offers some hope in future years but I have no doubt in my mind that the same drivers consumers had first time around will be different in the future and environmental and energy saving issues along with value for money will be right at the top of their agenda.

Collectively as an industry, trade associations, systems companies, IGU manufacturers , fabricators and installers alike–maybe the time has come to take a long hard look of where we go from here and consider reinventing ourselves. It is time that we realised that the traditional

market sectors and sales techniques that have delivered business in the past are no longer adequate to support an industry of this size in the future. Some of the latest data regarding the take-up of double glazing suggests that we are at 80%+ saturation with approximately 11% of what remains reported to be listed buildings, a sector where PVC-U, the most widely used framing material, has traditionally fared less well. We don't just need a change of direction but a radical re-focus at all levels of the supply chain. Maybe the sales pitch of tomorrow needs to reflect the mood of the moment and we should repackage our products as emission reduction goods, energy reduction appliances or CO₂ smart insulators. You can possibly come up with something much more plausible but you get the idea. In addition our Sales Representatives would require retraining and could possibly be rebranded as Energy Efficiency Managers or Carbon Reduction Advisors and our Specification Managers need to look beyond engaging with local authorities and housing associations and widen the spectrum to include organisations and NGOs that are influencing the policy makers such as the UK Green Building Council or possibly get our products specified with the energy providers who would be tasked with making the 'Domestic Property Loans' (for want of a better name) available which remain with the property and not the individual. There inlies another industry who may have to face-up to a similar radical change to our own. The business model of 'big 6' energy providers is built around selling as much energy as possible to as many people and organisations as possible. In the future surely that will no longer be an option and these huge utility companies will need to repackage themselves to become something akin to 'Energy Management Enterprises'. But of course we can also learn from other industries that have already had to readjust because of saturation whilst having embracing environmental issues. Fifty years ago domestic central heating was the exception as opposed to the norm. Today there are very few homes without some form of central heating and therefore a central heating boiler as a result, but many of the boilers installed certainly over 10 years old are inefficient by today's standards and therefore contribute to global warming. Current legislation demands that only energy efficient boilers with a SEDBUK rating of either A or B can be installed. These modern boilers can save you an approximate £150-200 per year on your heating bills against a typical installed cost of £2,000-£3,000. These figures are not dissimilar to those that the consumer could expect to save by installing modern energy efficient windows for a similar outlay. Through the Window Energy Rating Scheme we have easily understood tools to demonstrate the benefits and savings our products can offer the demanding consumer.

That is why it is imperative that we make our voices heard and do everything in our power to ensure that the policy makers listen to us as an industry. If energy efficient windows were included as part of this long term initiative due to kick in from 2012 it could act as part of the stimulus needed to persuade home owners that they need to consider replacing their windows for a 2nd time and as a result secure our employment into the future. If we do not take steps to realign our business models and embrace these new challenges, the consequence of inaction may last far and beyond those that are caused by the current global recession.