

THE MANAGEMENT OF SUSTAINABLE SOCIAL HOUSING REFURBISHMENT STRATEGIES IN THE WEST MIDLANDS REGION OF THE UK

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The terms ‘sustainability’ and ‘sustainable development’ are currently in vogue, but what do they refer to? How do we achieve sustainability? Are construction managers achieving sustainability in their decision-making strategies in the important social housing sector of the industry? These are some of the questions addressed in this paper. A ‘snapshot’ survey was performed amongst a small, regional sample of Local Authority and Registered Social Landlords, using structured interviewing techniques. The aim was to ‘test the water’ regarding awareness of sustainable development in social refurbishment programmes. Through qualitative analysis, preliminary findings indicate a fragmented, non-coherent approach to this subject, with decision-makers unsure of the success of their actions in terms of achieving sustainability. Too much ‘voluminous’ information; not enough lucid information; lack of direction; and a heavy reliance on manufacturer product information were salient issues identified. Those participants interviewed were attempting to adopt a sustainable ethos. However, a more structured, coherent programme of sustainability implementation is required if construction is to significantly contribute to the goals of sustainable development.

Keywords: Bruntland Report, local agenda 21, refurbishment, social housing, sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of sustainable development has many definitions, the most famous and generally accepted being that of Bruntland: “Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). This objective can be expressed as ‘leaving enough for our children’.

Sustainability is not, as many perceive, just about protecting the environment, but embraces all aspects of human activity. Sustainability is a philosophy that takes an holistic approach to society, encompassing not only traditional economic and engineering considerations in the decision-making process but also, adds a third “E”: *the environment* (Institution of Civil Engineers 1995).

The UK Government have in their recent consultation document, *Opportunities for change* (Department of the Environment, Trade and the Regions 1998) set out four broad aims of sustainable development. These aims expand on the Bruntland definition: i) social progress that recognizes the needs of everyone; ii) effective

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protection of the environment; iii) prudent use of natural resources; and iv) maintenance of high and stable levels of employment.

Achieving sustainable development is a very complex process. As yet, no universally accepted definition exists of what constitutes sustainable development. In addition, little consensus of opinion (nationally or internationally) exists for a framework within which to develop methodologies/targets by which to measure success (or otherwise) of achieving sustainability by our actions (Department of the Environment, Trade and the Regions 1997). The need for a set of measures or targets for sustainable development was highlighted by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), more commonly known as *The Earth Summit* in Rio de Janeiro (1992). As a result, a Commission on Sustainable Development was formed aimed at producing a work programme to provide a set of sustainable development indicators (for decision-makers at national level) by the year 2000.

In 1996, the UK Government produced its first set of indicators of sustainable development (Department of the Environment, Trade and the Regions 1996), comprising some 120 indicators. Although welcomed, this was criticized for being too complex (too many indicators). The Government has subsequently produced a draft set of proposed sustainability indicators for consultation (Department of the Environment, Trade and the Regions 1998). Feedback on this revised list will be published in the summer of 1999, in the Government's revised UK strategy for sustainable development.

Research carried out in the construction sector with regard to sustainable development has traditionally focused on new-build infrastructure that 'takes less from the earth and gives more to people' (Barnett and Browning 1995). The BRE have developed methods of assessing the environmental impact of new developments, using the Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment (BREEAM) and Building Research Establishment Domestic Energy (BREDEM) models. Whilst both these BRE models assess environmental impact and the energy efficiency of a particular building, they do not fully encompass the holistic approach that sustainability promotes. A great deal of effort has been focused on the environmental impact of new developments, with Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) now becoming common place (Anon 1998), in addition to the economic, and social appraisal traditionally adopted. However, limited research has been targeted at the sustainability of work carried out on *existing properties* in the UK. This is not to say that the industry is not trying to conduct such refurbishment work in a sustainable manner. On the contrary, a great deal of effort is being directed at adopting practices, in particular, to minimize the impact of such work on the environment. However, one potential area of applying sustainable practices in the existing property market (which will significantly, positively impact on the Government's aims of sustainable development) is that of the refurbishment of social housing.

The purpose of this paper is three fold. First, it assesses the level of awareness of the concept of sustainability in the social housing sector in the West Midlands region. Second, it investigates the decision-making criteria used by social housing landlords when considering refurbishment of their domestic housing stock. Finally, the paper suggests a conceptual strategy for social housing landlords in the West Midlands for ensuring compliance with the Government's sustainable development objectives.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research elicited opinion and perceptions of sustainability amongst policy decision-makers in the social housing refurbishment sector at a (regional level) by analysing data from structured interviews, held with social housing landlords. The emphasis was on the level of their awareness of sustainability and, on assessing current practice in this sector.

In line with the aims of the paper, the population consisted of social housing landlords in the West Midlands region. Social housing landlords are predominantly of two types: Council/Local Authority Landlords; and Registered Social Housing Landlords (RSLs) i.e. those registered with the Housing Corporation. The sample chosen consisted of seven social housing landlords. This choice was based on telephone inquiries made by the first author to 5 Local Authorities and 5 Registered Social Housing. Of the 10 contacted, the seven interviewed were those willing to take part in this research. Albeit the sample size is small, it was deemed satisfactory for a convenience, or 'snapshot' survey of this kind. The sample consists of a reasonable balance of three Local Authority housing departments (designated LA1, LA2 and LA3) and four Registered Social housing landlords (designated RSL1, RSL2, RSL3 and RSL4 respectively).

A series of questions were put to the policy makers identified within each sample organization, during pre-arranged structured interviews. The 'questionnaire' was made up of two parts. The first part (A) assessed respondents' awareness of sustainability. The second part (B) assessed current decision-making characteristics of each organization in a sustainability context.

QUALITATIVE DISCUSSION OF RESULTS TO PART A OF STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Identification of questions is as follows QA, 1[i] = Question 1, section A, part i whilst QB, 2 = Question 2, section B, A similar classification regime applies to the RSL data. From part A (current awareness of sustainability issues) (QA, 1[i]), only one of the RSL interviewees understood the term 'Bruntland report', but was unable to elaborate on its significance. The LAs on the other hand, were more informed with two of the three interviewees having a comprehensive awareness of the Bruntland report, believing it forms the basis for modern day understanding of the concept of sustainability. This was not really surprising in view of the onus on Local Authorities to conform to, and instigate, the government's Local Agenda 21 initiatives, which aim to achieve sustainability / sustainable development at local level. Interviewees' understanding of sustainable development (SD) (QA, 1[ii]) elicited a range of replies, with again LAs showing broader definition and understanding of the issues explored. Comments were particularly made concerning economic, social and environmental aspects of sustainability. All LAs commented on the importance of sustainability and the emphasis they are placing on implementing practices/procedures that are deemed to conform to sustainable development. Conversely, the RSLs provided a mixed response. One RSL's understanding of SD being; "something that the Local Authority is involved with" and, "being something to do with innovation". An example was given as: "avoiding condensation when refurbishing stock". The other two RSLs replied that SD is: "concerned with financial appraisal; lasting the test of time; making use of existing materials/fabric of buildings; and matching supply for properties with

demand and the life cycle of materials". This was a somewhat fragmented interpretation but did show that some of the issues of sustainability were understood.

Understanding of Local Agenda 21 (LA 21) (*QA, 1[iii]*) was obviously clearest amongst the LAs with a comprehensive understanding of their responsibilities and obligations towards LA 21. Of the RSLs one did not know the meaning of the term, the other three commented on environmental considerations only, with emphasis being placed on energy conservation in particular. The RSLs mentioned that LA 21 involved public consultation / participation and increasing awareness and education (of environmental issues). Only the LAs were aware of the term sustainability indicators (*QA, 1[iv]*), but, made comments that, as yet, none have been produced by the government and that they were not aware of any in the housing refurbishment sector, or, for that matter in the built environment.

With regard to formal policies for achieving the goals of sustainable development (*QA, 2*) the LAs have or are in the process of, formulating LA 21 action plans. This is in tune with the Prime Minister's statement: "*I want all local authorities in the UK to adopt a Local Agenda 21 strategy by the year 2000*" (Blair 1997).

These strategies are to be put in place to demonstrate that sustainable practices are adopted within local authority decision-making processes. Only one of the RSLs indicated that they had a formal policy for achieving the goals of sustainable development which included: financial appraisal through its business plan; local supplier/contractor initiatives; commitment to the Government's New Deal; and continual assessment of the impact of money spent in the community. Whether this was indeed a 'formal' policy for achieving the goals of sustainable development could not be confirmed from the interview.

(*QA, 3*) related to staff training on sustainability / Local Agenda 21. One of the LAs had a formal staff training policy, which was carried out by external consultants (in house) in the first instance, and was directed solely at senior management. The aim of this programme of training was that all staff would subsequently be trained in house by senior management as an ongoing policy. The other two LAs did not have a formal staff training policy that embraced sustainability or LA21. One of the LAs commented: "we are making it up as we go along" and went on to mention that: "not enough networking was taking place to share ideas and experiences". This was rather surprising with the amount of pressure being exerted by the Government on LAs to conform to LA 21, and the ease of which (e.g.) email can facilitate such communication and networking. Regarding the RSLs, only one had a formal staff training policy to cover Local Agenda 21. This training was carried out off-site by an environmental engineering consultancy. The interviewee added that the main theme of this training was energy conservation, with only technical staff (surveyors) being sent on such training courses. It was indicated that in the near future housing officers would also be included in these training courses. This interviewee's understanding and interpretation of the term Local Agenda 21 did appear to be somewhat ambiguous.

When asked if the organizations have an informal staff training policy (*QA, 4*), the two LAs who did not have a formal policy had informal policies. One is being instructed and guided by their LA 21 officer, the other disseminated information via memos to Neighbourhood officers. Two of the RSLs did have an informal staff training policy, which comprised: dissemination of information via team briefings; one-to-one discussions at staff appraisals; and circulation lists of relevant information.

This seems to indicate this informal training relates to environmental awareness, rather than the full range of Local Agenda 21 policies.

From the findings this far it can be seen that there is a distinct difference in the awareness levels of Local Authorities with social housing responsibility (LAs) and Registered Social Housing Landlords (RSLs). This is not really surprising when the dissemination of the majority of Government information / consultation is being directed at local authorities to aid formulation of their Local Agenda 21 Action Plans. Generally, the RSLs were aware of sustainability, but their interpretation / understanding appears to be either biased towards financial sustainability or environmental protection. The fact that Local Agenda 21 encourages involvement of all within a given locality (thus therefore including RSLs) in achieving the goals of sustainability indicates that something seems to be lacking in this particular area such as communication, interpretation and implementation. Training on sustainability was a little more formalized (formal in one case only) amongst the LAs in line with meeting the needs of LA 21, but still not as structured as it could be in the view of the importance LAs had previously stated they placed on this issue. On the other hand, training appeared to be rather ad-hoc and informal within the RSLs. Again, this seems to reflect the pressure put on each type of landlord, by central government.

The RSLs universally commented on the 'glut' of information that abounds relating to sustainability and sustainable development; and the difficulties in finding concise information that is 'easy to follow' and hence implement. One RSL commented "we haven't got time to read through reams of documents, attend endless meetings and workshops to become even more confused. Why doesn't someone tell us what we should be aiming for and how to monitor our success?" This implies that lucid guidance is needed to prescribe actions / strategies, rather than provide information on the goals of sustainable development. Whilst LAs appear to be much more informed, difficulty was expressed with the implementation of actions aimed at achieving the goals of sustainable development. "How do we know we are getting it right?" was one very telling comment.

QUALITATIVE DISCUSSION OF RESULTS TO PART B OF STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

When considering which properties are to be targeted for refurbishment, (*QB, 1*) there was distinct difference between the two groups of landlords. The LAs universally commented on availability of finance being a major factor. Short term planning was a result of having around six-months notice of the next financial year's budget for housing refurbishment projects. Lack of long-term financial certainty reduced the possibility of long term refurbishment strategies. Grants from the Single Regeneration Budget amongst others, also played a major part in deciding which properties to refurbish. With this financial restraint in mind, LAs had decision criteria they used when budgets were known, including: physical criteria (age / condition of particular stock, current insulation standards, energy conservation qualities); economic, financial appraisal (based on 30 year life cycle of improvement); and social criteria (local decision, priority to elderly, disabled and tenants with health problems). One LA commented that previously, properties that would have been demolished have been refurbished because funds had been made available through the Government's Estate Action initiative, which only funds regeneration (not demolition and rebuilding which in this case was believed to be a more 'sustainable' option). It appears that current

funding arrangements have a major affect on the ability of LAs to implement 'sustainable' strategies in the refurbishment of their stock.

In contrast, the RSLs all had specific long-term business plans for their housing stock, ranging from 25 to 30 year life cycles. They had carried out, or were in the process of carrying out, stock condition surveys. These surveys aim to produce a database of all properties including information on: age; condition; state of repair; condition of fixtures and fittings; etc. From this database, repair and refurbishment programs were formulated five years in advance. In addition, emergency repairs were carried out as and when required using contingency budgets. Potential Section 82 action (unfit for habitation) were noted as being a major consideration amongst LAs, with one commenting on these accounting for a large percentage of their annual budget. (Specific figures were not quoted). Only one RSL in the sample commented on this but said that it was not a major decision criterion. In most cases tenant pressure/complaints were not a significant influencing factor amongst RSLs, but were significant amongst LAs, with local political pressure influencing decisions in some cases.

When considering the level of refurbishment (*QB, 2*), due to their limited access to funds, LAs were predominantly driven by the capital cost of each improvement option. One senior property services manager whose LA was responsible for almost 14,000 properties commented that: "little consideration was given to the implication of the improvements chosen". "Hand to mouth" and "what we could get away with" were other terms used. The two other LAs (although restricted in their actions) did as far as possible try to target their funds based on, in their words: "sustainable practices". Emphasis on: Best Value; increasing SAP (Standard Assessment Procedure) ratings; and achieving affordable warmth were all mentioned. One La stated that they have adopted a 'Best Practical Environmental Option' (B.P.E.O.) in their decision-making procedures. Whether they were achieving this they didn't know. RSLs decisions were primarily based on annual budgets derived from their respective business plans. Value for money was an important consideration with 'Best Value' being used by one RSL. All RSLs treated their stock as an asset, where increasing the asset value was a very important consideration.

When considering specific methods/materials applied (*QB, 3*), capital cost of the improvement was the primary decision-making criterion amongst all landlords. Secondary considerations, predominantly amongst RSLs were: performance in use; reliability; durability; and aesthetics. When asked how they assess these secondary considerations, interviewees stated that manufacturers information was an important influencing factor, combined with past experience and continual monitoring of performance (of each improvement). All landlords had informal policies towards using green materials, but used no structured method of assessing so-called 'greenness' other than based on supplier information, and/or opinions of the decision makers involved.

When asked if enough information was available to help comply with the Government's strategy for sustainable development (*QB, 4*) all interviewees emphatically said no.

Regarding specific information being required in the social refurbishment sector (that would help toward achieving the goals of sustainable development (*QB, 5*)) Comments of: "Government should specify what and how", "Too much information about, but little that tells us what to do" and "We need specific guidance and some form of

measure that we should be trying to achieve” were common place. Obviously, from these comments, some difficulty is being experienced by policy decision-makers in interpreting and achieving the goals of sustainable development.

CONCLUSIONS

From this study it can clearly be seen that sustainability is a major issue in the social housing sector of the West Midlands region. All participants in the survey were actively working towards achieving the goals of sustainable development, even though some were not sure of exactly what sustainability was trying to achieve. Distinct differences were highlighted between the two types of social housing landlords, with Local Authorities being more proactive in their policies and procedures than Registered Social Housing Landlords. The latter were universally supportive of the concept of sustainability but highlighted a lack of understanding of the holistic approach that sustainability encourages. This current situation indicates a mismatch of both funding and guidance. On the one hand we have local authorities with short term and often poor funding, yet, a very proactive approach to sustainability. On the other, we have registered social housing landlords with long term, well financed business plans, whose low awareness level of the holistic approach of sustainability needs addressing. Amongst all landlords interviewed, there was consensus to the fact that more lucid guidance should be available as to exactly how to achieve the goals of sustainable development. This may seem surprising to researchers’ in this field, with the enormous amount of information on this theme cascading down from various sources, e.g. The Department of Environment Trade and Regions (DETR), Construction Industry Environmental Forum (CIEF), The Building Research Establishment (BRE), The Housing Corporation, to name a few. However, the decision-makers interviewed, indicated that prescriptive guidance was required rather than general information relating to what sustainable development is all about. It is apparent that lucid, prescriptive guidance is called for in this context, at the earliest opportunity.

FURTHER WORK

From the findings of this snapshot survey, the authors have identified a need for further detailed work into identifying exactly what constitutes ‘sustainable’ social housing refurbishment. This future work will attempt to produce a decision support model for use by the decision-makers in the social housing refurbishment sectors in the West Midlands region. It is envisaged that the model will encompass the themes of economic, social and environmental sustainability of decisions made at local level. This research will build on other work currently being carried out in a similar theme, in particular the Civil Engineering and Building Services sector. Industry collaboration will be of paramount importance in developing a workable model and further active support and involvement of the participants in this work, has been agreed by all. This enthusiasm underlines the practitioner interest and, value of this work and the need for further and more detailed investigations.

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