

RTPI Environmental Planning and Protection Network

Seminar on EcoHomes, held at the RTPI offices, London on 03 March 2005

The RTPI's Environmental Planning and Protection Network attracted a full house to its first ever event. Held in London, members received an excellent presentation from Network member Maya Karkour and her colleague Nanik Daswani, of EcoConsulting (UK) Ltd, which is a certified BREEAM and EcoHomes assessor. BREEAM and EcoHomes are two independent sustainability evaluation methods, respectively for commercial / industrial buildings and homes, developed and monitored by BRE (Building Research Establishment) in the UK. They recognise superior environmental design, performance, and management of buildings through a rating scale, and cover both new and renovated developments.

BREEAM

The BRE Environmental Assessment method (BREEAM) is the world's most widely used means of measuring and improving a buildings environmental performance.

There are several categories:

- BREEAM offices. Initially launched in 1990. 25% of new office buildings are now assessed.
- EcoHomes. Launched in 2000.
- Special BREEAM: Schools, Retail (including shopping malls and high street shops), Industrial (including heavy industrial buildings)
- Bespoke BREEAM: Health buildings, sports facilities, crown courts, etc.

Best Practice Criteria

The certification outlines eight groups of best practice criteria against which buildings are assessed: Ecology and Land use, Energy, Health & Well-being, Materials, Pollution, Transport, Water, and Management (BREEAM only). In addition to evaluating the environmental performance of a development, BREEAM and EcoHomes take into account the need for high living and working standards, as well as a safe and healthy internal environment. Credit scores are awarded for each best practice criteria and added up to give a final ratings score. A score of 70% is required to achieve an 'Excellent' EcoHomes rating.

BRE ratings

BRE ratings range from Pass to Excellent:

- Pass: Most developments achieve a Pass with minor changes at no or minimum additional cost;
- Good: Developments which demonstrate good practice in most areas;
- Very Good: Developments which push forward the boundaries of environmental performance;
- Excellent: Developments with exemplary environmental performance across the full range of issues. Excellent ratings are awarded only to houses that uphold exemplary sustainability performance at both an environmental and social level.

Benefits for the Developers

- Can facilitate local planning permission by demonstrating sustainability criteria;
- Can minimize investment, negligence, and liability risks; and appeal to ethical investors;
- Can increase the value of property and leasing prices;
- Can improve image as an environmentally and socially-responsible developer.

Benefits for the Occupants

- Lower utility bills through higher energy and water efficiencies;
- Healthier, safer and more comfortable internal environment;
- Better quality of life by ensuring access to local amenities and reducing car dependency;
- Lower absenteeism and higher productivity.

Embracing sustainable development

Buildings account for around 55% of the UK's emissions of carbon dioxide, which makes them a large contributor to climate change. However, there is considerable scope to increase buildings resource and energy efficiency both at the design and construction stage and during its lifetime occupancy.

BREEAM takes into account:

- Environmental Protection – climate change; waste, water, and resource use; land-use and ecology; materials used
- Social Concerns – health and well-being
- Economic Development – cost-efficiency and time-efficiency.

Network members also learnt that English Partnerships require all offices and homes on their land to obtain a 'Very Good' rating, and that the Housing Corporation currently requires a 'Good' rating for all their affordable housing projects, which is expected to rise to a requirement for a 'Very Good' rating by 2006. The Millennium Communities Programme is being built to an 'excellent' rating.

Discussion

Following the presentation, network members debated a wide range of issues, which are summarised below:

- **Difficulties with credit ratings.** One criticism could be that there is no minimum threshold for each category, so a development could score highly on some best practice criteria, but have a low score on others, yet still obtain a 'Very Good' rating. However, it would be impossible to obtain an 'Excellent' rating without, for example, any energy credits. It is not a perfect scheme, and there is deliberately a great deal of flexibility, as it is a voluntary scheme and people need to be convinced of its benefits. However, BRE is continually increasing its requirements, and there would likely be less flexibility should the scheme become compulsory.
- **Materials:** There are 16 credit points relating to materials. There is no particular credit for the use of local materials, but this would be taken into account in the

life-cycle rating. And if a case can be made, a particular product can be upgraded, and manufacturers can ask BRE to review a product's life-cycle and rate it more positively if its manufacturing process is more eco-friendly than a similar product. BRE lists on their website at <http://www.bre.co.uk/> the manufacturers who use environmentally-friendly products. Re-using materials results in maximum credits, so it is not necessarily harder to achieve a high rating for a refurbishment than for a new-build. However, refurbishment is more expensive than new build.

- **Marketing.** BRE is responsible for marketing, although all assessors do a share on a voluntary basis. However, there is not much promotion undertaken at a consumer level. To date, marketing has concentrated on the supply, rather than the demand side.
- **Planning permission.** EcoHomes certification could be useful in obtaining planning permission. One problem is that certification takes a long time – it can be up to a year – and there is no interim stage to prove to a planning committee that it will be obtained. However, there is scope for the assessor to submit an environmental or sustainability report with a planning application, as EcoConsulting did for example for a controversial scheme in Abingdon. There is also scope to condition or use s106 Agreements to require that EcoHomes certification is obtained.
- **Local planning policies.** Planning policies can specify standards of sustainable building and construction to include BREEAM and EcoHomes certification. However, there is a great deal of discrepancy at present between Councils on their requirements. LB Enfield requires planning applications to be accompanied by a sustainable building statement, even for householders. Wrexham BC has local planning guidance (supplementary planning guidance) requiring certification for major applications.
- **Enforcement.** There is concern that requirements stipulated during the planning process may not be undertaken, particularly if developers wish to cut costs as a development proceeds. This can be remedied by conditions, and if requirements are included in UDPs, this carries weight. Post-construction assessment can also be undertaken as an additional requirement.
- **Future development of the scheme.** BRE welcomes feedback on the scheme. It is expected that developers will start to promote the scheme as they realize there is an economic benefit, and thus create a demand. When BedZed was built it was originally thought the properties would be worth less than those around the development, but in fact they are currently worth 15% more. There are also proposals to lower stamp duty on energy-efficient homes, which will help create demand, although this would not be based on obtaining an EcoHomes certification. The new EU Directive requiring public buildings to display an energy efficiency label should also help promote the scheme.

Network members thanked Maya and Nanik for their excellent presentation. The Network's Steering Group will consider how the issues raised in the debate can be taken forward.