

ANDREW WARREN

DIRECTIVE SHOULD BE GREATEST STEP CHANGE IN ENERGY IN BUILDINGS

Now that a new European directive is at the final stages of approval the time is right for a simple energy performance comparison mechanism for all commercial buildings.

There are 160 million buildings in use across the 15 Member States of the European Union. Within the next ten years, we should have a fair idea of the energy performance standards of most of them. And improvements to many of those operating below par should be well under way.

That is the philosophy behind a new European directive, the final details of which have just been approved. The only outstanding issue is just how swiftly it will be implemented everywhere. Some governments are seeking delays, arguing they have neither the systems in place nor the trained personnel to deliver what should be the greatest step-change in energy in buildings yet devised.

But there is now no dispute at all about what will happen in each country. And, for that matter, why. The Energy Performance of Buildings directive - official number COM/01/226 - has been raced through the normally cumbersome and time-consuming procedures of European law making. One of the prime motivations has been the realisation that quite so large a proportion of Europe's fuel is burnt in our buildings.

It is around 40% of total consumption, of which two-thirds is in homes, one-third is in commercial buildings. The single biggest dimension in each case is heating (and, increasingly, cooling). It makes up 70% of residential and 50% of commercial energy use.

There have been two main political drivers behind this initiative. One has been the concern felt across much of

Europe about the increasing levels of energy imports.

The other is climate change. The EC is rightly unequivocal: "Energy efficiency is the single most

cost-effective and publicly acceptable way of meeting our Kyoto objectives." President Prodi's initiative, the European Climate Change Programme, concluded that in the first Kyoto period (ending in 2010) the new buildings directive should be able to deliver 45 million tonnes of savings for the EU. Just to put that high figure in context, the European Alliance of Companies for Energy efficiency in Buildings (EuroACE) - to whom I am an advisor - commissioned research which confirmed that businesses were capable of delivering 450 million tonnes, ten times that amount.



Given the dispute about the timing of implementation, even that 45m tonnes forecast may be a distinct over-estimate. Initially, the EC had assumed that the directive would be fully operational from 2004. The European Parliament recognised that 2005 might be more realistic. But the 15 governments have rendered even that optimistic.

The final negotiations on the directive hinge around whether Member States can wait until October 2009, before fully implementing the directive. Should this be conceded, the chances are that the actual savings by 2010 will be closer to 4.5 million tonnes, rather than 450 or even 45.

The real stumbling block does not concern the requirement for there to be an agreed general framework which creates an international methodology for calculating the energy performance of a building. Or how often these should be revised. Or the need for all buildings over 1000 sq. metres in size being renovated to be brought up to acceptable energy performance standards. These will all be enshrined in national laws by 2005, at the very latest.

It is the energy survey part of the directive which apparently needs longer still to implement. It is fair to say that, whilst many countries have long had energy rating systems for at least new homes, there has been little progress in establishing satisfactory survey mechanisms for commercial buildings.

The challenge is to develop a single mechanism which satisfactorily compares energy performance between a hotel, an office and a shop. It is difficult to see how this can be done easily. After all, it isn't even that easy to devise a means of comparing ostensibly similar shops. They may have identical planning consent approvals, but the fuel use profile between, say, a hairdressing salon and a newsagent/bookshop is very, very different.

Given that every country has to develop a mechanism, it

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might be sensible to pool resources and come up with a single energy performance comparison mechanism for all commercial buildings throughout Europe. Actually, bearing in mind how many retail and hotel chains operate internationally, that would be a genuine contribution towards reducing trade barriers, and creating a Single Market. So we have here a great opportunity. Which at any rate ten years from now, will be having more impact upon upgrading the places we live and work in than any other single initiative to date. That has to be very welcome.

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