



FUTURE PROOF?

EU energy performance rules are heading for a crisis in Ireland, Frank Coles reports.

Energy efficiency is an evolving concept in industrialised nations that is rapidly gathering momentum. Based on the experiences of energy crises in the past and the probability that further crises will occur in the future, specific measures are now being implemented across the EU that will not only reduce reliance on dwindling fossil fuel supplies but also restrain emissions to required levels under the Kyoto Protocol.

The Energy Performance of Buildings Directive (EPBD) is just one of the methods the EU is using to turn targets into realities at the member state level. Through a series of measures such as performance

based energy labelling, the EPBD requires members to reduce energy expenditure in buildings. This sector accounts for nearly 40 per cent of the energy used in the EU and many of the methods available to conserve energy require relatively simple changes in construction practices. While some countries are ahead of the new regulations and will derive the immediate benefits of high performance buildings other countries are predictably less enthusiastic.

For countries like the Republic of Ireland, currently the seventh most oil dependent economy in the world, with one third of its housing stock less than

a decade old and an estimated 80,000 houses built in 2004, energy efficiency measures, especially for housing, would seem desirable for long term prosperity. Recent reports however tell a different story. Internal documents recovered under the Irish Freedom of Information act may indicate a conscious effort by permanent government representatives to favour energy inefficient industries, specifically the concrete industry, and encourage the use of outdated technologies like hollow concrete blocks that in northern European climates are generally understood to be “unfit for human habitation”. →

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Everyone in Ireland seems to know who manufactures these blocks and who government routinely favours at the expense of others. “It is widely known that representatives of the concrete industry have a direct influence on holding back regulations,” confirms Jeff Colley Editor of industry magazine Construct Ireland. The usual suspects are construction supplies giant Cement Roadstone Holdings (CRH) who never seem too far from the public eye or from allegations of running secret cartels, predatory pricing and anti-competitive behaviour.

Multiple sources have reported further negative behaviour in Europe. Former Irish MEP Nuala Aherne was involved in the EPBD's conception and was appalled when she found out that Irish representatives in the European decision making structure “were obstructing energy efficiency proposals”. “I don't suppose that the Irish government or their European representatives were acting without the intense lobbying from the construction industry in Ireland,” she says.

Minister Dick Roche for the Department of the Environment recently responded to similar parliamentary questions that, “nobody has lobbied me on this issue.”

With a recent reshuffle it is plausible that no lobbying has taken place since his arrival and “if he can take an opportunity to say ‘I wasn't lobbied’ he'll take it” explains Aherne. “There is immense enthusiasm on the ground amongst people who know anything about it,” she says, “so the inertia must come from the political system and the policies.”

From their responses it seems that the current Irish administration would like to delay the implementation of the directive until 2009, a measure that the Construction Industry Federation (CIF) publicly demanded of them in 2004 claiming that there were insufficient inspectors, despite having had several years to prepare.

Across the traditional political divides many consider the EPBD a missed opportunity for Ireland, a country rich in renewable potential, when compared with other European countries such as Denmark, who have been leading the legislation rather than following it. Renewable technologies there are expected to achieve “huge growth” over the coming years and already account for five per cent of exports. Jens Laustsen, from the Danish Energy Authority remarks: “We have had a very positive reaction from the building industry”.

The Danes have been running energy labelling schemes for small buildings since 1997 and are already drawing up plans for new ratings to supersede the EPBD that will reduce the energy expenditure of a property by half.

For countries in a similar position to Ireland future proofing the energy supply that drives an economy seems a logical precaution. The usual argument given for not seizing the initiative earlier is that existing regulations are never enforced. In response to this, the European Commission's Director General for Energy and Transport recently informed lobby groups that from the information he has he will “have to take out proceedings against around a half of the member states”.

With the EPBD just one of several EU initiatives on the table and the certainty of more to follow is Ireland setting itself up to undo the growth of the last ten years? What has been perceived as a niche market is now going mainstream and many feel Ireland may be moving backwards rather than forwards, Aherne concludes: “We have a festering energy crisis in this country. It is really quite serious.”

Frank Coles