

'Buzz and energy' as BESA Conference and Awards bounce back

4 years ago



The Building Engineering Services Association's first 'in person' [National Conference](#) and Awards for three years broke historic attendance records with 270 delegates and more than 400 guests at a sparkling awards dinner in London hosted by the comedian Zoe Lyons.

More than 50 speakers across three busy theatres at the Novotel London West addressed the conference theme: 'Bringing buildings to life' from a wide variety of angles including current and future skills, the decarbonisation challenge, human health and well-being, and the implications of the country's current economic woes.

The Conference also saw the launch of [World Ventil8 Day](#) - a global initiative aimed at improving ventilation standards in buildings to protect the health, well-being, and productivity of people worldwide.

The event, which was sponsored by [Mitsubishi Electric](#), paused briefly to take in the news that Prime Minister Liz Truss had resigned before ploughing on with industry topics addressed via a mixture of panel debates and in-depth technical presentations.

CEO David Frise reminded the industry that its work was important "because 90% of us spend 90% of our time in a building so the social good that results from good building engineering services is massive".

Pressure

He said the industry played a crucial role in people's health and well-being. However, he added that the way we design and build led to "broken buildings...and broken people" with two suicides a day evidence of the pressure many construction workers face.

As a result, the Association was supporting the mental health charity [Light House Club](#) with a £10 donation for every delegate. BESA members were also able to attend the conference for free thanks to the high level of sponsorship received.

BESA President Rab Fletcher also welcomed the return of ‘real life’ events pointing out there was no substitute for “being in the room”.

“Anyone who isn’t here today may well have missed a key conversation or chance meeting that could change their business,” he said. “And, they won’t have heard or engaged with our wide field of experts from across the industry and beyond.”

Fletcher said the country was facing a series of crises, including energy supplies, cost-of-living, climate change, and building safety but there was still room for optimism.

“Many of us have been arguing in favour of energy efficiency for years, but it was hard to get clients to invest,” he told the Conference. “Now the financial argument has changed...and while politicians are looking for quick fixes and short-term sticking plasters, our industry will be central to efforts to put this right for the long-term.”

The President added that BESA was “pushing hard” for a fully funded national programme of building retrofits as the best and most cost-effective way to reduce carbon emissions in line with net zero targets. However, he also urged the delegates to look at how commercial buildings could be re-purposed in the face of changing occupancy patterns.

This theme was picked up during a panel session about ‘The Future Building’ where speakers pointed out that more clients, planners, and developers were challenging the industry to make existing buildings perform better rather than build new ones.

“The industry needs to get its head around the fact that refurbishment is where it is happening,” said Frances Brown, associate director of Hoare Lea.

“The market is moving quickly towards re-use and repurpose and that means in-depth improvement of building performance through continuous upgrades.”

Several speakers also said Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) reporting was another driving force for clients keen to improve their carbon footprint and deliver better building ‘experiences’ for their own staff, customers and tenants.

The keynote address was delivered by healthy building champion Professor Cath Noakes OBE from the University of Leeds. She said ventilation was the most overlooked building safety issue and stressed the importance of infection control being part of building designs.

She said the pandemic had led to greater collaboration with lots more sharing of knowledge and best-practice about making buildings more resilient to the transmission of diseases. “People realise we can’t solve this on our own or by arguing about whose tech is the best,” added Professor Noakes.

Challenging

However, she warned that this winter would be very challenging because people would be looking to

conserve energy by not opening windows, which could lead to other health problems linked to mould and damp.

Professor Noakes also launched the new annual World Ventil8 Day, created by a coalition of scientists, academics, engineering bodies and environmental activists. #WorldVentil8Day

The first one takes place on November 8 and will involve a series of 'in person' and online events. It is being driven by BESA, CIBSE and FETA in the UK in partnership with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Future Urban Ventilation Network.

World Health Organisation (WHO) clean air advocate Rosamund Adoo Kissi-Debrah also took part in a discussion about the role of ventilation and urged the UK to learn from other countries that already have models in place to help people improve the indoor air quality in their homes and schools.

"We don't need to re-invent the wheel. Let's look at what is already being done elsewhere - like Germany and Belgium - and adopt that. We also need to use every means of communication at our disposal to tell people about their indoor air as it is still a new concept to many - but so many are terrified of the outdoor air!" she said.

Other highlights included a panel chaired by BESA President-elect Claire Curran chaired about Women in Construction that welcomed the growing number of young women coming into the sector but said the building services sector needed to market itself better to attract its fair share of talent.

"A new generation of women are showing interest in careers where they can influence climate change so need to be directed our way," said Lucy Sherburn of Fairheat. "We need to point out that we are saving the planet...while many other careers are not."

Alexandra Knight, founder of the diversity initiative STEMazing, urged delegates to promote engineering careers in their local schools. She added that stereotypes needed to be challenged more aggressively including suggestions that STEM careers are not for women and that "you have to be amazing at Maths".

Competence in general was an over-arching theme with Arup's transformation director Gill Kernick calling for a change of emphasis: "The industry is very focused on tackling competence, but tends to stick to 'technical' competence because that's what we understand best, but we need to be competent in areas like analysing why we fail and risk management."

More also needs to be done to encourage demand reduction in buildings to meet decarbonisation goals, according to Scott Mason, chair of the CIBSE Patrons, who was part of a panel looking at potential heating solutions.

"We often jump straight into mechanical intervention and ignore demand reduction like façade efficiency upgrades," he said. "People can get railroaded by tech - I've got a bigger heat pump than you! - and we need to avoid competing claims when it is likely to be a combination of solutions that will deliver the right results."

There was an open forum about a ground-breaking collaboration between the built environment's leading professional bodies who are seeking to align the data standards used to manage costing, carbon and building and facilities maintenance, in a bid to clear up confusion and shift the digital focus from new build

to whole life building performance.

The fact that BESA, CIBSE, RICS and NBS are working together on this with support from the Government Property Agency prompted one attendee to describe it as a “game changing moment for building maintenance and operation”.

There was also general comment from delegates on the “busy atmosphere” and breadth of topics covered in a relatively short period - with a range of ‘takeaways’ to help them shape their business strategies for the coming months welcomed.

As one senior figure said: “There’s a buzz and energy around BESA, you want to get things done and I like that”.

You can also find the full list of BESA Awards 2022 winners [here](#).