

Built environment 'desperate for an upgrade' says BESA President

2 years ago



Buildings should be made to work better for social and economic reasons; not just to meet safety and climate change goals, according to the President of the [Building Engineering Services Association](#) (BESA).

Speaking at the opening of the [Association's annual conference in London](#), Claire Curran said the government's "flip flopping" on net zero and infrastructure policy should not be used as an excuse to delay investment that would "make buildings work better".

"It makes no difference that the government has got cold feet over its net zero timetable and the cost of vital infrastructure," she told over 300 conference delegates. "We still have a built environment that is desperate for an upgrade.

"We need look no further than the 'crumbly concrete' scandal in schools and hospitals for proof that our existing building stock is not being properly maintained. Vital investment in refurbishment and retrofit has fallen so far behind the curve that many of our built assets are no longer fit for purpose."

She told the event, which was sponsored by [Mitsubishi Electric](#), that improving the built environment should be a priority as it was critical to "the hopes and aspirations of this and future generations".

"The buildings we live and work in are crucial to our well-being and quality of life – and there is nothing more fundamental than that."

Landlords

Curran also criticised the two thirds of residential landlords who told a recent survey that they would rather sell their properties than pay for energy efficiency improvements to meet EPC regulations originally due to

come into force in 2025.

“And then the government scrapped the deadline anyway,” she said. “What sort of signal does that send? The whole point is that we are supposed to be improving buildings – not letting them continue to degrade.”

She added that if the government was serious about wanting to help families who are struggling with rising costs, then it should support a major programme of building refurbishment and retrofit to reduce their energy bills.

“Whether you think net zero is achievable or not, making buildings better is surely a basic social responsibility,” added Curran.

Dr Jo Jolly, head of project futures at the Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA), called for delivery teams to be more “courageous and honest” to achieve sustainability goals and avoid the continual “race to the bottom” on quality and cost.

In her keynote presentation, she told the BESA conference that too many members of project teams felt afraid to call out poor working practices due to the “toxic culture” that affected many projects.

“We are facing a shit show with the climate emergency, and we need to tackle it with fearlessness,” she said. “These are the last best years we have to make a difference before time runs out.”

The Building Safety Act was a key focus for the event held at the Novotel London West with considerable debate around the new competence requirements that came into force this month. However, Neil Hope-Collins from the Office of the Building Safety Regulator pointed out that “if you were competent before the Act you are still competent now”.

He said that it was the principal contractor who had the ultimate responsibility for making sure buildings were planned, managed, and delivered in accordance with the Building Regulations. “If they don’t give you the time and the resources [to get things right] that’s on them...as long as you told them.”

He added that competence requirements were not just about which “card or a piece of paper” somebody holds, but “the skills, knowledge, and competence for doing the job”.

Creating a more diverse, skilled workforce was another theme for the conference with BESA’s Future Leaders group of young engineers taking a leading role. They also acted as ‘roving reporters’ gathering information for the post-conference feedback.

“Much of today’s programme is aimed at the emerging generation who will underpin our industry,” said Curran. “They are the ones who will benefit the most if we get things right and deliver a built environment fit for their future; but by the same token they have the most to lose if we fail.”

The conference also featured the launch of a new industry [guide to mould and condensation in buildings](#) – a collaboration between BESA’s Indoor Air Quality (IAQ) Group and Mitsubishi Electric.

Clean air

Leading air quality campaigner Rosamund Adoo Kissi-Debrah told the launch session that a proposed new Clean Air Act – dubbed ‘Ella’s Law’ in memory of her daughter who was the first person in the world to

have air pollution stated as her cause of death – would give the UK “the best clean air laws in the world and improve the health of the nation”.

A [petition in support of the law](#) has already attracted 10,000 signatures and the aim is to raise that to 100,000 to force a debate in Parliament.

The conference concluded with a keynote presentation from Lord Markham, the Minister in charge of delivering the government’s programme to rebuild the NHS estate by 2030. He urged the industry to work with his department to introduce greater levels of product and design standardisation that would improve efficiency and speed up project delivery.

He said the 2030 deadline was a “drop dead date” because several hospitals would have to close as they were no longer fit for purpose. The improved facilities could cut their operating costs by up to 10% and patient recovery times would be speeded up by 20%, he added.

“You should never let a good crisis go to waste,” said Lord Markham. “We have no choice. These hospitals must be built, and they will be even if the government changes.”