

CIBSE President Fiona Cousins discusses the future of building services engineering in podcast interview

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CIBSE's President, Fiona Cousins, appeared on the podcast "Behind the Built Environment," hosted by BESA's CEO, David Frise. In this engaging episode, Fiona shared insights into her engineering journey and highlighted the critical need for broader problem definitions in building services that extend beyond mere cost and efficiency.

She emphasised the importance of incorporating carbon reduction, biodiversity and social value into the core of building services engineering. She noted how evolving client demands for decarbonisation and carbon neutrality are shaping the industry and stressed the need to integrate safety, climate change and societal impacts into design goals. This approach aims to prevent issues similar to those revealed by the Grenfell Report, ensuring that the sector evolves responsibly and sustainably.

"Building services engineers have the potential to create safer and more sustainable buildings if they adopt a broader perspective," Fiona stated during the podcast. She challenged the engineering community to "lift their eyes to the horizon," urging professionals to account for social needs, biodiversity and embodied carbon in their work.

Fiona acknowledged that while engineers excel at problem-solving, they often focus on problems defined in the past rather than adapting to the changing demands of clients. "Over my career, what 'good' looks like has changed significantly. Five or six years ago, none of our clients were asking for decarbonisation; now they all are," she reflected.

In her inaugural address as CIBSE President, Fiona, who also holds multiple roles at Arup, including Americas Region Chair, Arup Group Board member, and Arup Fellow, called for a “reimagining” of building performance. She believes this shift will unlock the full potential of building services engineers to address vital social issues, such as health, wellbeing, and productivity.

Throughout the podcast, Fiona advocated for collaboration between BESA and CIBSE to enhance public understanding of how building services engineering positively impacts lives. “We need people to understand more about what enables them to live their best lives while in buildings,” she remarked. “More value needs to be attached to good buildings – those that provide comfort, mitigate climate change, and support health and wellbeing.”

Fiona concluded by stressing that building services engineers play a crucial role in ensuring proper ventilation, safety and comfort in the spaces people inhabit, and these aspects should be valued more than they have been in the past.