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Research reveals gap between vision and action on building safety

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There is a yawning gap between what people say about the need to comply with the Building Safety Act and what they are doing in practice according to the Building Engineering Services Association (BESA).

This was one of the key findings of the Association's second annual survey of the sector's response to the legislation, supported by Barbour ABI. While 78% of respondents said improving building safety was a top priority for their organisations, only half of those thought they had done enough to achieve compliance.

BESA's report: 'Turning Awareness into Action' also found that just 39% of micro and small companies were even aware of the Act and its consequences and one in five respondents, who did know about the Act, said they were still unclear about their roles and responsibilities.

Most respondents to the survey said there was an urgent need for more guidance, practical support and mandated training to help them achieve compliance.

They were also heavily critical of client behaviour, accusing many of carrying on with 'business as usual' putting low cost and speed of delivery ahead of new, legally required safety measures. As a result, a significant proportion of respondents called for stronger enforcement of the regulations with real penalties for those who fall short.

Generation

"Talk is cheap," said Nick Mead, technical director at Laing O'Rourke and chair of BESA's Building Safety Act advisory group. "This is the biggest change to working practices in a generation and paying lip service will not cut it. Everyone needs to play their part and those who don't will be left behind as the industry moves forward.

“There is also a damaging attitude, still widely held, that the Act only relates to higher risk buildings (HRBs) – it doesn’t, it applies to all of our work,” said Mead. “Everything is changing including the Building Regulations and technical standards to support the creation of a safer and more robust framework in which the industry must operate.

“This has huge implications for professional competence – whether you work on HRBs or not. A lot of people have not got that message.”

BESA said it would use the research findings, which were unveiled during its annual conference last week, to further develop the support it was already providing to members and the wider sector through guidance and practical advice – much of which can be found on its Building Safety Hub.

It is also working with the Building Safety Regulators’ Industry Competence Steering Groups to develop competence frameworks and address ongoing problems around planning gateways where many projects are being delayed. A new Clients’ Guide to the Building Safety Act will also be published later this year.

“While awareness of the Act is high across the BESA membership, the research confirms that there is a lack of consistent understanding of what is needed in practice,” said BESA’s director of specialist knowledge Rachel Davidson. “They would welcome mandatory training leading to specific qualifications in line with the Act.

“SMEs, in particular, need clarity and consistency of sector-specific guidance with a concise set of requirements clearly set out for them. This could be supported by practical tools to help achieve compliance such as templates, checklists and phased compliance roadmaps, helping them to benchmark their progress and manage their resources.”

The research is free to download here.