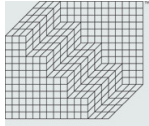


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Parliamentary Inquiry: Innovation in Construction, the Design of our Built Environment

Overview

The **Associate Parliamentary Design and Innovation Group** (APDIG) proposes to undertake a research inquiry to investigate the barriers to embedding better and more innovative product design in the construction of our built environment, and the hurdles to achieving ‘wise standardisation’. **The core objectives are:** to identify key problems with current policy; highlight best practice (with case studies where appropriate); develop policy recommendations that address the barriers identified; and seek change in policy and practise.

Background

At the dinner on 1st March, the steering group discussed the matter of product design in our built environment. Concerns were raised that these products and fittings – the ‘bits and pieces of construction’ – have not kept pace with wider technological and design developments, and this is to the detriment of the built environment.

Rod Macdonald, Chair of Buro Happold:

‘The UK has many of the world’s best designers, and yet when we look around at our buildings, we find that many of the pieces – the fittings and products – we put into them are Victorian or older, and some of them actually don’t work very well. That’s not good enough. The things that we put into our buildings should work well, should be easily fitted, they should be easily maintained, look good and be the right price.’

Concern about design standards in British industry has maintained over many years. Part of Prince Albert’s motivation for co-ordinating the Great Exhibition of 1851 was a worry that Britain was lagging behind other industrial nations. He recognised that, whereas France and Germany were skilled in the manufacture of fine quality goods, and the Americans were particularly strong on innovation, the British were often too preoccupied with cost. Prince Albert’s concerns of 1851 are arguably valid today.

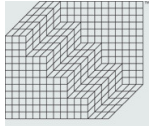
It appears that a lack of standardisation in the construction industry means a gap in the market for best quality products (windows, doors, taps, lights, flooring, M&E), that are affordable and readily available. Filling this gap would represent a major leap forward in the quality of our built environment.

The lack of good quality design across-the-board in construction (undoubtedly there are isolated examples of good quality) is partly a casualty of a combination of hesitant industrial and manufacturing policy, no architectural or design policy until very recently, and a construction industry that is, as the Egan report and Constructing Excellence’s recent review have both shown, resistant to change.

Importantly, it is not that we are lacking in engineering, architectural, or industrial design skills, but rather somehow failing to capitalise on this intellectual asset.

These kinds of advanced knowledge, skills and services are an integral part of the much-vaunted ‘knowledge economy’. Currently we are training many product designers only for them to move abroad in order to find work at the cutting edge of their field. There are many areas where we will never be able to compete with emerging economies on cost; the knowledge economy is not one of them.

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The moderation of the built environment presents a significant challenge in meeting the Government's self-imposed Carbon targets. More widespread uptake of new ideas and practices in the construction industry will be necessary to meet those targets.

The quality of the built environment is a health and well-being issue; the environments in which we live and work cannot fail to affect us. There is now a real need for flexibility to adapt to the changing needs of users/consumers, particularly the ageing population. And finally, a point that Paul Finch of CABI put forth - the continuing functioning of the planet is the ultimate health issue.

Key Policy Areas

What policies, and where would intervention be helpful?

This research question is a prism through which to examine several interrelated policy fields. The ultimate goal should be to look to effect progress on two fronts:

1. ensuring the supply of good quality building products (a new attitude with regard to manufacturing), and
2. ensuring the uptake of innovative products and practices by the construction industry (a new attitude with regard to specifying)

There are inevitably differences between the public and private sector, which should be recognised and addressed. How the public sector operates and what it demands from PFI is a different question to how to regulate building that happens outside of the public realm.

The inquiry could investigate this issue and make recommendations on policy intervention from a number of angles:

1. Culture and Consumer Demand

The demand for quality should be a consumer-driven movement, but that is dependent on education and design understanding. How can we raise expectations and demand for design standards from consumers – for example: house-owners, clients? How can we persuade consumers to be less accepting of poor quality design?

2. Regulation

The best regulation is demanding but not prescriptive, allows innovation and drives quality. Government has a responsibility to ensure that regulations and standards are constructive and not restrictive. As an initial measure, how can we ensure that regulation with regard to the built environment operates in this manner? Secondly, is there a way of wielding regulatory tools to encourage something more than basic compliance?

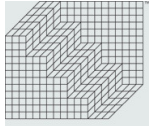
3. The Environment for Manufacturing

Currently many of the building products used by the construction industry are developed abroad. But with the emerging market in the UK for manu-services, there is an opportunity, and it would be highly sensible, to start importing less. Indeed it seems to be a recognised political imperative that we do more to support the industrial base of the UK economy. Therefore, how do we (and is it possible to) make the UK a more attractive place for manufacturers?

4. Tackling the Construction Industry

There are some very clear recommendations in both Egan's and Wolstenholme's reviews about improving the behaviours of the construction industry. This lack of standardisation and good design quality is one of many casualties of traditional, non-collaborative working practices and focus on lowest cost. What more can be done to push uptake of their recommendations? How can the

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construction industry be encouraged to create greater demand for better products? Is the sector, indeed, sufficiently skilled to be able to work with the newest products and technologies?

5. **Political Reform**

How do we create better public support systems that encourage interdisciplinarity and a longer-term view? How can the construction industry's various representative bodies be persuaded to work more collaboratively?

6. **Case Studies**

Are things like Community Land Trusts a good response to some of the above issues? What is the value of design award schemes in improving quality throughout the industry? Is the public sector notably better than the private, or the other way around, and what can be learnt from that?

Research Methodology

The inquiry will be based on a combination of extensive interviews with relevant expert witnesses from across all relevant stakeholder groups, and in-depth desk based research. The research and report compilation will be conducted by a dedicated APDIG Research Coordinator, managed by the Group Manager. The inquiry will be overseen by a Steering Group and more select formal Panel.

The Steering Group will consist of experts¹ from across the key relevant stakeholder groups, (most of whom will have attended the dinner in March) which will provide strategic guidance for the project, chaired by the parliamentary chair(s). The Steering Group will convene at least three times during the project:

1. **At the outset:** to help frame the key areas of research and identify relevant stakeholder groups, witnesses, existing research and/or appropriate case studies.
2. **At initial draft stage:** to discuss the initial findings and proposals.
3. **At final draft stage:** to discuss the final report and recommendations.

Research Output

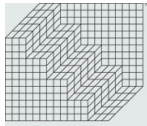
The research project will culminate in a final published report detailing the key issues, highlighting best practice, and proposing specific policy recommendations to government as to how best to overcome the issues identified.

A campaign strategy will be developed to coordinate the launch and dissemination of the report. This will include:

- A formal launch in the Houses of Parliament by the report parliamentary chair(s) and with relevant Ministerial representation, to an audience of parliamentarians, senior civil servants, and executive level stakeholders from across the relevant stakeholder groups, as well as appropriate media representation.
- The coordination of national and relevant sector press coverage of the report and recommendations, to raise awareness in external stakeholder groups.
- The dissemination of the report to all relevant political and external stakeholder groups.
- The utilisation of APDIG parliamentary relationships to table relevant parliamentary questions, organise subsequent parliamentary events (including parliamentary debates, and roundtables and conferences with key stakeholders).
- The utilisation of APDIG parliamentary and government relationships to promote the report and recommendations to key policy-makers and facilitate political buy-in to the objectives of the report and encourage policy development in line with the report findings and recommendations.

¹ Report sponsors will be able to nominate a representative to sit on the Advisory Panel

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Draft Research Timeline

The formal inquiry will last for approximately six months (excluding background research):

July – Sept 2010 [background research]

- Scoping research to identify key themes and topics for the project, including key stakeholder groups and potential research witnesses.
- Discussions to confirm parliamentary chair(s) and identify and confirm Steering Group members.
- Draft formal research outline and terms of reference.
- First Steering Group roundtable, to confirm terms of reference for the project, identify key stakeholders to contact, highlight key reference documents, and suggest potential case studies.
- Begin formal research, inviting written evidence and organising witness interviews.

November 2010

- Core research and interviews completed.
- Second Steering Group roundtable, to discuss the initial findings and proposals.

January 2011

- Final report (draft) completed.
- Final Steering Group roundtable, to discuss the final report and policy recommendations.

March 2011

- Final report published and launched by the APDIG in the Houses of Parliament.
- Coordination of follow-on activities.

APDIG Experience

The APSRG, and its sister groups within Policy Connect², have an excellent track record in delivering highly regarded reports on key policy issues, that succeed in engaging with policy-makers at all levels to raise these issues up the policy agenda.

The latest APDIG report; *Design and the Public Good: Creativity vs. the Procurement Process* (March 2010), was co-signed by Baroness Janet Whitaker and Sir George Cox.

The report was launched in the House of Lords by Barry Sheerman MP, with corresponding coverage in a range of relevant sector press. Follow up activities are on-going and will continue post-election, to include the establishing of a new Design Commission, discussions with the OGC and COI, and an awareness-raising campaign.

Recent reports by APDIG sister groups within Policy Connect have, respectively: received press coverage in *the Guardian* and *the Independent*; received an official written government response³; received a Ministerial response in the House of Commons⁴; and been referenced in government and executive agency publications⁵.

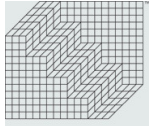
² Policy Connect is an independent and politically neutral not-for-profit company limited by guarantee that provides the secretariat for a range of parliamentary groups, including the APDIG.

³ Skills Commission (2009) *Progression Through Apprenticeships*.

⁴ Westminster Sustainable Business Forum (2008) *Costing the Future: Securing value for money through sustainable procurement*

⁵ Department for Business Innovation and Skills (2009) *Skills for Growth* (White Paper); Office of Government Commerce (2008) *Sustainable Procurement Operations on the Government Estate – Delivery Plan*.

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Appendix

1st March Dinner attendees:

Rod MacDonald	Buro Happold
Mark Prisk MP	House of Commons
Paul Morrell	Chief Construction Advisor
Barry Sheerman MP	House of Commons
Mike Cook	Buro Happold
Gavin Thompson	Buro Happold
Lynva Russell	Policy Connect
Eddie McElhinney	SAS International
John Stehle	Laing O'Rourke
Bill Olnier MP	House of Commons
Derek Wyatt MP	House of Commons
Prof. James Powell	University of Salford
Sir Alan Rudge	ERA Foundation
Richard Barrington	Sustainable Innovation
Paul Finch	CABE
Andrew Wolstenholme	Balfour Beatty
Donnathea Campbell	Billings Jackson
Robin Oram	Sir Robert McAlpine
Tim Boswell MP	House of Commons
Eleonora Cervellera	Buro Happold
Jocelyn Bailey	APDIG
Nick Raynsford MP	House of Commons
Lord Alan Howarth	House of Lords
Keith Priest	Fletcher Priest
Peter Kelly	Blueprint Magazine

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For further information please call **0207 202 8588** or email jocelyn.bailey@policyconnect.org.uk

The APDIG is a forum for open debate between Parliament and the UK's design and innovation communities