

Are Our Resource Efficiency Efforts Going to Waste?

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People and especially the younger generations want change and jobs. They want a world that is fair and offers them, at least equal, opportunities to fulfil their dreams. That's what sustainable development is about. Is that really the direction we are moving towards though? Because from following the news recently you get the feeling that that message is getting lost.

In the United Kingdom, the government has announced the abolition of the Site Waste Management Plan Regulations introduced in 2008 for construction and is in consultation on the abolition of the Code for Sustainable Homes as a standard for residential developments.

Looking to reduce the administrative burden for companies the government made a commitment to examine the legislation and cut down on red tape. That's a great cause. At these difficult times we are all behind it. But when does a piece of law become unnecessary red tape? Legislation is a great tool for bringing about change in an area where you know vested interests will not make the transition easy. For example, the smoking ban could only have happened through legislation.

During the consultation period for the abolition of the Site Waste Management Plan Regulations what came through was the need to reinforce the input at the design stage. Because what better way of ensuring a development is sustainable than through its design. Sustainable design means using less energy, water, waste, a higher proportion of environmentally friendly materials, a lower carbon footprint and thinking about the future.

We need to take a long term view and think of the unthinkable, that the building may become redundant or may need to change use. A design that is flexible allows a building to be transformed to meet the needs of the future and lives through the generations. For example a building that was initially a hospital may house a school and can then

become apartments when the design is appealing and the materials reusable, like timber floors.

For sustainable development any unavoidable waste is still a resource. Materials and products can be repaired or disassembled for spares that can be reused or recycled or at the very least they may be used as fuel. But people need to be aware of those options and the materials and products need to be designed to allow reuse and recycling. It's the only way to make the process cost-effective. For that there needs to be an investment in training.

But who can take on an investment when the benefits are not straightforward to track and measure and can spread across generations? That's when legislation can come into play but other bodies can act as catalysts as well. As an example I mention the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, created by Ellen MacArthur after experiencing first-hand what it means to circumnavigate the world depending on finite resources. The Ellen MacArthur Foundation is a good example for its holistic approach. It promotes a circular economy, where the whole life cycle of a product is considered. It reaches out to education as well as manufacturing to ensure sustainability is built in and not an afterthought.

To understand where to focus our efforts we need to have data on what we are wasting. Knowing the sources of waste will assist in better planning. So instead of planning on how to manage our waste we can then plan for resource efficiency. We can turn the abolition of regulations such as the Site Waste Management Plans to an opportunity to introduce Resource Efficiency Management Plans, a spherical approach for designing, buying and dealing with materials and products. This should drive costs down as fewer raw materials, which we are running out of, will be needed. As a society we will have made a step forward in learning to live within our means. This will make the world a little fairer.

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