



**BUILDING CONTROL
SURVEYORS**

RESEARCH PROJECT

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BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

The research project with Building Control Surveyors (BCSs), undertaken in late 2015, was part of a larger research programme looking at the roles of individual professions within construction. Little previous academic research has examined the work that BCSs do and the part they play in construction projects. We wanted to focus on this vital but overlooked role. The findings from the project have been presented at two academic conferences and have been submitted as a paper to a peer-reviewed academic journal. A summary of findings will be made available on our research website in 2017.

CAREER PATHS

Two main paths into the profession were evident: some of the BCSs interviewed had begun working in construction straight from school, in a trade, in general construction or in a drawing office; of these, most subsequently joined a local authority as a trainee building control surveyor, undertook part-time study and achieved academic and/or professional qualifications. Other interviewees had taken a construction-related degree such as architecture, engineering or surveying, gained industry experience and then moved into building control and gained professional qualifications. It was clear that all of the BCSs brought both practical experience as well as knowledge from academic education, on-the-job training and continuing professional development to their work.

THE PARTICIPANTS

The participants in the study were 21 professional Building Control Surveyors (BCSs) from across England, 11 of whom worked in local authorities and 10 who worked as approved inspectors. In addition, four senior representatives of the major professional bodies were interviewed, one each from the Association of Consultant Approved Inspectors, the Chartered Association of Building Engineers, the Chartered Institute of Building, and Local Authority Building Control. The range of projects handled by the participants could be seen to relate to location, with city-based offices handling more commercial work, suburban offices handling more residential and some rural offices dealing with tourism and leisure, but all participants dealt with a variety of work.

Little difference overall was noted between the responses of BCSs working as approved inspectors and those in local authorities. Both were customer-focused, and both were conscious of competitive pressures which was perhaps more in evidence in the responses from those in local authorities. In terms of workload, most approved inspector practices were busy but managing. Some offices had vacancies or expected to recruit in the near future although finding people with the depth of experience required was found to be challenging. Partnering agreements between councils and similar arrangements between approved inspectors helped efficiency and resourcing. However, a number of local authority building control offices felt they were inadequately resourced and this impacted on their ability to inspect to the extent they would wish.

KNOWLEDGE AND INFLUENCE

“I think a building control surveyor does actually have to have quite an extensive depth of knowledge...”

There were differing opinions on the role of the BCS as a generalist rather than a specialist. Some compared the BCS to a medical General Practitioner or a “Jack of all Trades”:

I think a building control surveyor does actually have to have quite an extensive depth of knowledge, a bit of a Jack-of-all-trades, ... you must have enough of an understanding to be able to have a discussion with a specialist engineer about how a service would go into a building and how, perhaps, it would affect the structure or the fire safety of the building [AI-5]¹.

However, some of the participants themselves or their colleagues had specialist skills, in access, fire engineering, and SAP calculations for example.

When it came to sustainability, the participants showed a broad conceptualisation of sustainable construction. To them, it meant not only energy efficiency and consideration of carbon embedded in materials but also avoiding waste, buildability, biodiversity, economic and social sustainability, use of recycled materials and renewable energy, responsible sourcing, transport of materials and water management. An aspect mentioned by several participants was the importance of durability and future proofing of buildings

The “*extensive depth of knowledge*” [AI-5] contributed by BCSs to their projects was apparent. This knowledge was not limited to the regulations but extended to offering suggestions for achieving compliance on potentially difficult projects such as listed buildings, problem solving, proposing alternative solutions and making judgements in grey areas around how the requirements can be met. In part, the knowledge was based on experience, with BCSs typically seeing many more projects over their career than other construction professionals. Some participants explicitly noted their role had increasingly involved education of others in the project team and “*pass[ing] the information on to builders and designers*” [LA-2] as regulations have become more complex and fast-changing.

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To maintain anonymity, quotations from participants are designated as AI for approved inspector, LA for local authority and KI for key informant, with the participant number.

ARE ALL BUILDING REGULATIONS OF EQUAL IMPORTANCE?

Participants were asked if all building regulations were viewed as equal. Consensus was that all regulations were important and compliance with all was required. However, most interviewees also felt that while *“they are all equally important...some are more important than others, if that makes sense”* [AI-3]. Fire safety was generally considered most important, followed by structural requirements. Some BCSs also prioritised energy conservation (Part L) and accessibility (Part M). In general, the BCSs based their priorities on risk of harm and adverse consequences to the building occupants. One explained that intricate and less tangible requirements, such as a detailed energy strategy, can be more difficult to explain to clients and builders, especially in the early stages of design of a complex building. Although a few interviewees would consider Part L amongst the less important regulations, others would include it amongst the highest priorities.

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THE ROLE OF THE BUILDING CONTROL SURVEYOR

“cajoling, negotiating and steering”

BCSs liaise with the full range of professionals involved in construction projects, including architects, engineers and other consultants, contractors and builders, including site managers and site operatives, other professional specialists, and clients and the general public. They need to be able to communicate effectively at all levels: *“You have to be able to relate to the whole spectrum, from the guys digging and underpinning a hole in a basement, to the managing director of a large corporation”* [AI-1]. Building a good relationship means efficiency and consistency in their services. Further, good rapport means being seen as a valued member of the team, and feeling part of the team was important to the BCSs. Because of the breadth of their connections, building control is perhaps uniquely placed as a pivotal role on the construction project. Some participants recognised this position, referring to passing on design intent through the team especially on site where the design team may not be available.

When asked to explain the role of the BCS, although many participants mentioned ensuring compliance with building regulations, most went beyond this to talk about the overarching objectives of the regulations: *“to ensure the building is fit and safe for use”* [AI-1]; *“it’s to provide safe, accessible, sustainable buildings...for the benefit of society really”* [KI-1]; *“putting it quite bluntly, it’s to stop people dying”* [LA-2]. Most clarified that the building regulations represented minimum standards. Many of the participants felt that their role was limited: *“you’re working inside a set of regulations”* [KI-3]. The challenges of implementing more sustainable construction were mentioned by a few participants: clients may not be interested and developers typically are focused on profit margins, seeing greater environmental sustainability as leading to increased costs. Most of the participants described their role as simply implementing the regulations and wholly constrained by government policy.

However, in contrast to these views, there was ample evidence of the influence wielded by BCSs in the project team. All of the participants spoke about offering advice, being pro-active in assisting the client and project team to achieve their objectives, and working with the team to find solutions. Several explained how an authoritarian approach simply would not work – the participants talked about using *“advocacy and persuasion”* [AI-5] and *“cajoling, negotiating and steering”* [LA-1] to ensure that the project met the goals of the client and team as well as building regulations. A few participants felt that the role of the BCS was somewhat underestimated within the industry.

“we have a huge impact on the built environment, huge”

In fact, we would suggest that the importance of the role was undervalued by some BCSs themselves. There was a noticeable contrast between explanations that the role was limited to compliance with building regulations, and explanations of the day-to-day interactions in which BCSs advise, guide and even persuade other professionals. Although the regulations form the framework for the BCS's role, it can be suggested that the BCSs are very influential within the scope of that framework. The level of influence of BCSs was indeed recognised by some of the study participants: *“we have a huge impact on the built environment, huge”* [AI-2], and that influence was perceived to be at both policy and working level. There was discussion of driving the industry through taking expert positions on policy groups, advisory panels and standards boards, and at the working level *“encouraging builders and fellow colleagues to go beyond the minimum”* [LA-2] as well as advocating building-wide innovation such as off-site construction. With respect to sustainable construction, the participants also spoke about advising, guiding and advocating more energy efficient buildings. Some participants described being pro-active in their role, pushing the boundaries, promoting good practice, and *“encourag[ing] people to think”* [AI-2].

Academic theory argues that social power, that is, the potential to influence others, is derived from a number of sources. There is the legitimate power of authority and the power to reward or punish: these are clearly possible sources of power for building control, with the ability to grant or refuse a completion certificate. However, the study participants were clear that they rarely used authoritarian methods and described them as normally unacceptable. Other forms of power, termed ‘soft forms’ by theory, include those of expertise and information: people who are recognised as knowledgeable or who have access to valuable information can be highly influential. In our opinion, the building control surveyors who we interviewed possessed these forms of power, even if not all recognised it. The participants referred not only to their knowledge and experience but also to the recognition of their expertise by others: *“[the client] respects our knowledge and specialism and how we understand technology”* [AI-10].

SUSTAINABLE CONSTRUCTION

The participants were asked to comment on how building control could help to make construction more sustainable. Unsurprisingly, many of the participants referred to the need for further legislation – without additional requirements within the building regulations, they felt that there was no contribution they could make. However, there were many comments on the inadequacy of existing and previous legislation. Several people explained that Part L had become increasingly complex: “You go to Part L and I’m sorry, but you need to be a scientist to really understand what it’s telling you” [LA-10]. Due to the specialist skills required, SAP calculations were done by specialists and BCSs could only check that the relevant information had been completed. On site, visual inspection was of limited use as different levels of insulation in different parts of the building can be traded off to ensure an overall U value. Whereas for most regulations, BCSs can inspect components on site, for Part L, component checking is not sufficient. Any changes from the design specification, however slight, must be checked back to the overall thermal model, which may need to be recalculated by a specialist, and it is therefore likely that there will be differences between the thermal model as designed and as built.

A few participants felt that responsibility for more sustainable construction lay with planners. Others pointed out from their experience with Code for Sustainable Homes that clients and architects felt there were multiple, possibly conflicting requirements being made of them, and that the new Parts G and M will be confusing in terms of responsibility passing between planning and building control. Previous experience has also shown that policies may not be stable and may be withdrawn or altered with little notice, as has happened with the Green Deal, Code for Sustainable Homes and Zero Carbon Homes. The lack of drive for improvement from the current government and a policy direction of getting rid of legislation was noted. Inadequately thought-through regulation has increased problems of poor indoor air quality and ventilation. Some participants felt that Part L has been beneficial but cannot be developed further: “Part L has gone to its limit on fabric” [AI-8]. In summary, although legislation may help to drive sustainability, it cannot be depended on to deliver. Previous research has argued that the ‘intermediaries’, that is, the people who are part of implementing legislation, are critical. Thus how BCSs go about their daily work is crucial to progress in construction generally, and for sustainable construction in particular.

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A few participants felt that encouraging more sustainable construction was not within the remit of building control or acknowledged that it was just not important for them. This was disappointing to hear, given the scale of the potential impact of climate change on society and the level of change required of the construction industry. The target of 80% reduction in carbon emissions compared to 1990 levels by 2050 set in the UK Climate Change Act (2008) demands major improvement on new and existing building stock but it appears that not all building control surveyors are aware of the magnitude of change needed. However, most of the participants showed an informed understanding of sustainability in construction and a number actively pursued greater sustainability in their day-to-day work. These BCSs understood that their role as expert allowed them a position of influence:

There’s always a bit of influence in the sense that you get a lot of clients asking you...what we would recommend for them as being the most sustainable method of construction... so our role, I guess, is a mix of almost ensuring that all the regulations are complied with, but also aiding the client and helping to advise them, from our experience, what works/ what doesn’t work in the method of construction, that can be from purely technical construction to sustainability, or any other areas [AI-7].

Another participant was involved in a flagship project where *“we invite people to come and build houses, for example, which go beyond the minimum, so...we could actually demonstrate excellent practice – not just good practice, but excellent practice”* [LA-2]. His aim was to educate the public to demand better energy efficiency:

What do people look at [when buying homes] – location, location, location- they need to be educated into the fact that it’s not just where the building is, but what it can do and building control, I think, really could play a part in that [LA-2].

Several participants saw the role of building control as raising awareness and educating clients and other construction professionals. They noted building control’s existing position as an independent body that already conducts inspections on site. They acknowledged that greater expertise would be needed, and additional resource, especially in local authorities, but felt that building control were *“the only people... we’re already there, we’re already inspecting this, you don’t need to train up a lot of random people who don’t really know what they’re doing”* [AI-2].

So opinion varied on the role of building control in sustainability. Although a few people were not yet engaged with the improvement agenda, a number were actively pursuing higher standards of sustainability in their daily job. Despite the formal constraints on the BCSs’ authority, these surveyors had found ways to deploy their knowledge and experience to have a positive impact on their construction projects.

CONCLUSION

With the understanding that influence is not only about the formal power of authority but can come from being acknowledged as having expertise or relevant knowledge, and the pivotal role of the building control surveyor having direct interactions with all the main players on a construction team, the role of the BCS has the potential to be strongly influential. At the policy level and, perhaps even more importantly, on a day-to-day basis, BCSs are a valuable resource to move the industry forward, on sustainable construction and on quality more generally. Perhaps the first step is for BCSs themselves to acknowledge that their experience, knowledge and connections make them particularly influential members of the construction team.

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