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Paul's blog: Carbon footprinting is catching

Published: 31 August 2007 17:32 | Author: Paul Toyne | [More by this Author](#)
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I am writing this blog sitting on a fast train to Manchester. Between you and me I am struggling to know where to start on the subject of sustainability. Knowing where to focus and gain meaningful engagement is not just a problem for me but an industry-wide problem. Why? Because the subject is vast: from waste and recycling to green procurement and food miles; from fair-trade and working with communities supporting disadvantaged or socially excluded groups to supporting wildlife and reducing noise and pollution and so on and so on...



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"At present the built environment accounts for 47% of greenhouse gas emissions in the UK"

Paul Toyne

At Euston Station, before embarkation, my mind was exposed to 'sustainability marketing' - a poster campaign informed me that taking the train involved 76% less carbon emissions than driving the car. But what were they doing about their own carbon emissions? Is this what we mean by sustainability - telling people about others poor performances but not demonstrate our own accountability? So how should the train company manage its carbon footprint? Perhaps through offsetting emissions through planting trees or support renewable energy projects? Has my conscience been eased by the visible promise of benefits of low carbon train travel compared to the motor car? Should I not consider about other corporate responsibility issues such as procurement of staff uniforms, the food served on board, recycling of the waste from thousands of daily travellers?

So just what are businesses supposed to be doing to reduce their carbon footprinting? Is offsetting the best approach? Should everyone do it? Do we need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions rather than just stabilise them? For me there is an even greater problem - how can we reduce carbon footprints when the model we live by is all about economic growth powered by oil and gas? We all want to improve the quality of our lives, but how do we do it without reaching a tipping

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where the resilience of the planet is stretched too far? This is the holy grail of sustainability. Tony Blair for years pushed for the need to decouple carbon emissions from growth, but the trick is actually being able to do it.

Although the concept of sustainability has been slow to catch on, the construction industry is now starting to consider how best to reduce the carbon footprint of operations as part of its approach. The government, in the form of the Department for Business Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (formerly the DTI), together with other central government departments have developed a draft strategy for sustainable construction. They are looking for your views so have a read about www.berr.gov.uk/index.html under 'business sector' and write back!

So, why are they concerned? Because at present the built environment accounts for 47% of greenhouse gas emissions in the UK and a recent audit by CABE reveals that over 80% of all new housing stock built in the last 5 years did not sufficiently address sustainability issues such as energy performance. Whilst reducing our carbon footprint in the construction, the draft strategy consultation also draws attention to the need for new buildings to be able to cope and adapt for future climate change.

It's a tough one and tackling climate change is set to be on the corporate and political agenda for a long time to come, but going back to my previous prediction of whether the impact of my train journey should worry me, offsetting is a start given the tumultuous task ahead and the need to improve energy efficiency, reduce energy use and switch to low carbon energy, my conscience is by no means soothed!

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