

Easy as A, C, D

Building labelling is heading our way. Buildings will be categorised in the same way as fridges, washing machines and other domestic equipment.

Not that it's happening overnight, of course. We'll probably have to wait until 2009 before this happens – largely because no one seems to have worked out exactly how the scheme will operate.

Nevertheless, we must welcome any programme with raises the issue of energy efficiency with many property owners and developers who may not have given it a second thought so far.

For those of us on the inside of the building services sector, the idea that energy efficient buildings equates with good financial sense (for owner and occupier) seems blindingly obvious. But it doesn't seem to have sunk in with those who influence specifying decisions or building design.

Services engineers are specifying energy efficient plant but further down the line, someone decides that cheaper and – let's face it – less energy efficient products are a better choice.

Building labelling has a long way to go before it's applicable. How it will work is still shrouded in mystery. Possibilities include a sub-labelling system for every piece of equipment in the building which will then contribute to the overall score.

But the scheme also needs to allow for the structure's air tightness, and also for use of techniques such as use of thermal mass, passive cooling etc.

When these issues are debated and decided, it will be crucial for services engineers to have their input. No one else in the construction process has the level of knowledge of these issues to make certain that building labelling is both usable, and meaningful.

If the scheme has loopholes and pitfalls, it will be entirely pointless both from the point of view of engineers, and their clients. And if clients don't believe that an energy label really does indicate a building's level of efficiency, then government might as well not bother.

A well organised labelling scheme will put an easy-to-see value on efficiency. One which non-engineers can quickly grasp.

It may even affect the value of commercial property, with A-rated buildings picking up more rent – thus encouraging more people in construction to take a closer look at whether those boilers are labelled 'A' or 'B' rather than simply being £100 cheaper, and stamped with 'Made in Turkey'.

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