

Sponge Survey 03/04

In partnership with the Sustainable Construction Task Group



Sponge

Sponge is a network of open-minded individuals from a wide range of professions who share an interest in sustainable development in the built environment. It is an independent group that gathers, debates, clarifies and promotes new ideas and successful initiatives relating to sustainable development and the built environment. Sponge is a registered charity which exists to explore and demonstrate how the application of the principles of sustainable development can improve the quality of our built and natural environment, thus contributing to a better quality of life, healthier lifestyles and more prosperous communities.

Sponge organises a host of activities for its members including tours of sustainable developments such as the Eden project, Beddington Zero Energy Development (BedZED), Chatham Maritime. Seminars, workshops and debates on relevant topics such as climate change, sustainable housing and signature architecture have been held for its members to get involved in and learn from. Volunteer days for groups such as Habitat for Humanity have been popular amongst members, as well as networking events like Speed Spanging.

Sponge currently has over 600 members. Membership is free and any one can join by going to the Sponge website www.spongenet.org and heading to the 'Get Involved' page.

Survey of sustainability in the construction industry

Sponge recently undertook a survey about the sustainability performance of the construction industry, in partnership with the Sustainable Construction Task Group (SCTG). The aim of the survey was to assess members' experience and perceptions of the construction industry; the results will assist the SCTG in assessing and improving the sustainability performance of the construction industry and will be used by Sponge in developing its future activities and in providing feedback to inform nCRISP and DTI work programmes.

The survey involved several stages. Initially, an outline framework/questionnaire was developed and this was tested at an initial policy event on 1st October 2003, where George Martin of Forum for the Future (and an SCTG member) presented information about the current performance of the construction industry. The questionnaire was then developed into an electronic survey form that could be completed over the internet and copies were sent to Sponge members to fill in – copies of the survey can still be viewed at www.spongenet.org.

Survey objectives

- To assess the industry's performance (using the SCTG Sustainability Ladder and other models)
- To seek views on barriers to improved performance
- To explore business case reasons for improving performance
- To consider the effects of training/skills and the current industry structure
- To suggest steps required to improve future performance

Survey information

- A total of 73 people responded
- 35 people attended the consultation event
- 67% of members are aged 22 to 35
- 56% work in the private sector
- 30% designers, 50% advisors/consultants

Key findings

- **Education:** only 50% of members rate their academic courses as providing sustainability coverage that is adequate or above and very few (14%) members rate their CPD or further training as excellent or thorough
 - **Work and Sustainability:** as incentives for this group, 'client demand' is the most effective factor for improving sustainability performance. Members highlight 'lack of proof of the business case' as a major barrier to improving performance
 - **Company performance:** the lowest ratings included the use of targets and public reporting of performance. Charities are providing greater leadership and support to their staff
 - **Industry leadership:** a small number of companies are leading the way and gaining the recognition for doing so
 - **Priorities for action:** climate change, leadership (including clients) and social inclusion and accessibility are seen as priorities
- ... See 'Recommendations' on the back page.



Photo courtesy Sonny Madero

▲ Sponge members on a tour of the Eden Project

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Survey Sections

- **Education and Sustainability:** looked at the coverage of sustainability in academic education and CPD training.
- **Your Work and Sustainability:** examined the main allies currently helping members to improve the sustainability of their work and the key factors that would help improve future sustainability.
- **Your Company and Sustainability:** asked members to rate the sustainability of their company against various criteria including: compliance with legislation, promoting awareness and demonstrating the business case.
- **Priorities for action:** members identified areas they believe were priorities for Sponge and the industry including: climate change, skills training and future generations.



Photo courtesy Tom Randall

▲ Sponge members on a tour of Chatham Maritime



Photo courtesy Bill Dunster Architects

▲ BedZED

Education and Sustainability

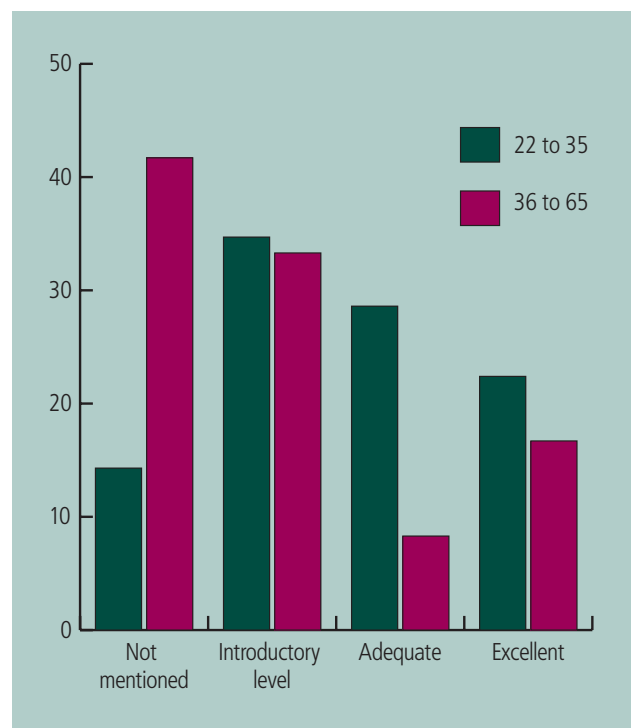
This section looked at the coverage of sustainability issues in members' academic education, as well as how well CPD or other training has equipped them to address sustainability issues.

Overall, CPD training has a better rating for sustainability coverage (50% adequate or higher) than academic education (40% adequate or higher). However, CPD training has a low rating of thorough/excellent coverage at only 14%.

Comparison of the two different age groups (22 – 35 and 36 – 65) shows that 42% in the older age group stated that sustainability was not mentioned at all in their academic education whilst this was the case for only 14% of the younger group.

It is pleasing to see that CPD and other further training has a more even spread over the age groups. In fact, 62% of the older group deemed their further training as adequate or better for sustainability coverage, although this is lower, at 43%, for the younger group.

Finally, there is not a vast difference between roles/disciplines and the coverage of sustainability within their academic education, where as for further training, advisors/consultants have the highest 'excellent' rating at 20%, compared with only 5% for designers.



▲ Age group vs sustainability included in academic education

Barriers and Incentives

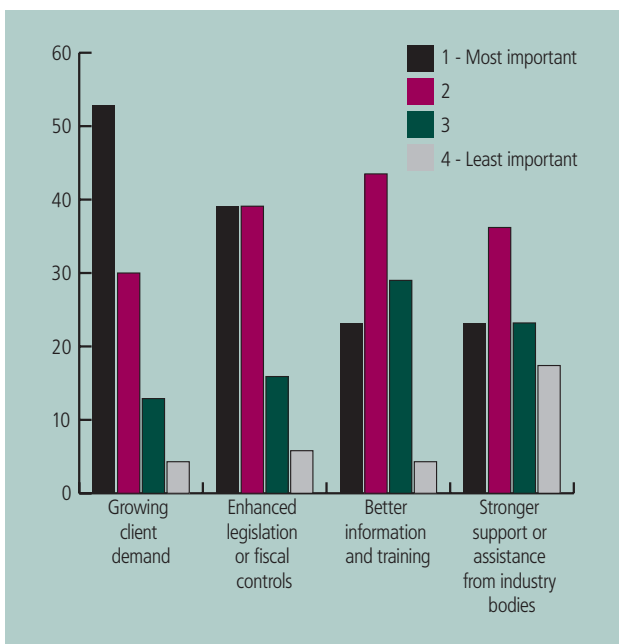
In this section, respondents were asked to identify the greatest allies, main barriers and factors that improve sustainability in their work.

With an overall rating of 30%, 'client demand' is considered to be the overall greatest ally in supporting current efforts to improve sustainability, with quite an even breakdown across organisation types. Interestingly, amongst those working for charities 57% deem 'support from a senior colleague' as their greatest ally, whereas this is as low as 8% for the public sector and 14% for the private sector.

When considering factors that would help members to improve the sustainability of their work, 'growing client demand' is clearly rated the most important at 53%, significantly higher than 'legislation or fiscal controls'. Perhaps surprisingly, 'stronger support from industry bodies' is rated the least important at 17%.

The main barriers to addressing sustainability at work are clearly 'lack of understanding or proof of business case' (30%) and 'lack of awareness' (25%) for both public and private sectors. However, for charities 'affordability' is the key issue at 50%. At the consultation event, 'the planning system' was also identified as a major barrier.

In the breakdown of roles/disciplines, the barriers to addressing sustainability are viewed quite differently. For designers it is largely 'affordability' and 'lack of demand' (at 29% and 24% respectively). For advisors/consultants on the other hand, it is the 'lack of awareness' (33%) and 'lack of understanding or proof of business case' (42%).



▲ Factors to improve the sustainability of work

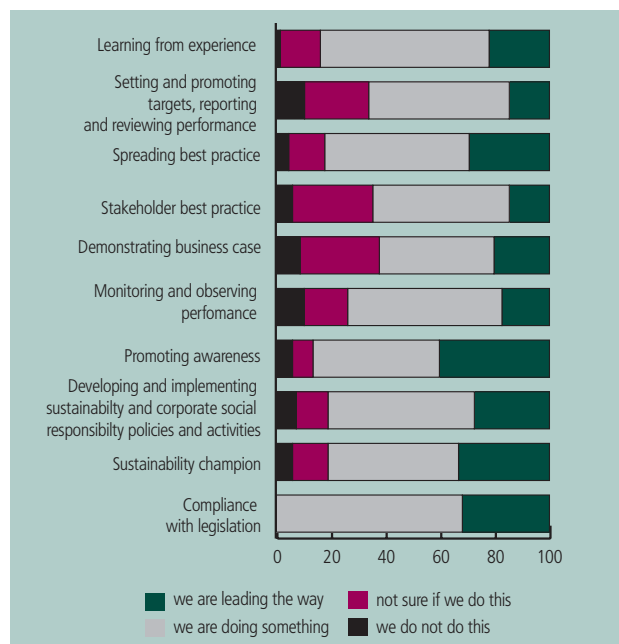
Company Performance

Here members were asked to rate the sustainability of their company against a range of criteria, developed from the SCTG sustainability ladder, including:

- 10 learning from experience
- 9 setting and promoting targets
- 8 spreading best practice
- 7 stakeholder dialogue
- 6 demonstrating the business case
- 5 monitoring and observing performance
- 4 promoting awareness
- 3 developing and implementing principles
- 2 sustainability champion
- 1 compliance with legislation

Results suggest that most members feel their companies are 'doing something' and even 'leading the way' with some criteria. Although, overall ratings are fairly similar for all of the criteria, which seems to suggest that sustainability is not addressed in this linear or ladder-type fashion.

The key criteria where members rate their company as leading the way include: 'compliance with legislation', 'sustainability champion', 'developing and implementing principles'; 'promoting awareness', and 'spreading best practice'. The criteria with the lowest ratings are: 'demonstrating the business case'; 'setting and promoting targets'; and 'stakeholder dialogue'.



▲ Company sustainability performance

In partnership with the Sustainable Construction Task Group

The members who work with charities are by far the most complimentary of their organisation's role, with well over 40% suggesting that their organisation is leading the way on many criteria (sometimes as high as 70%). For other organisations (both public and private), only one criterion - 'compliance with legislation' - achieves a rating of over 40% for leading the way, whilst only 21% of members think that their company is leading the way on average across the other criteria.

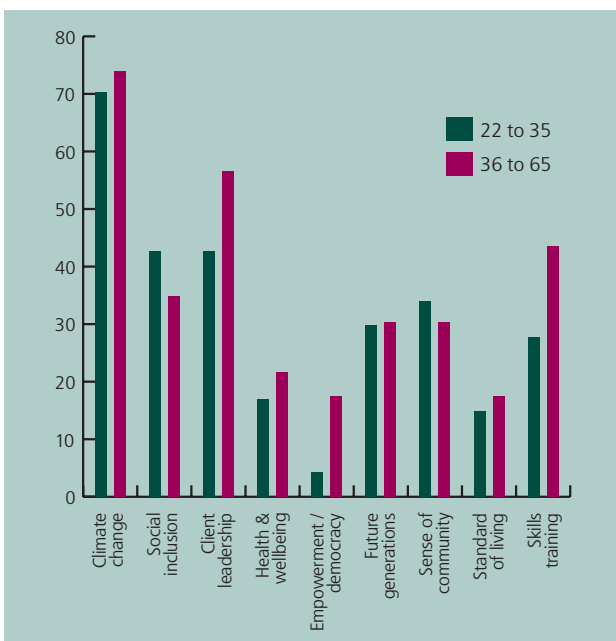
Members attending the consultation event stated that sustainability performance of their own company was an important staffing issue. They felt that their perception of company performance would have a strong influence on their decision of where to work; this could therefore have an impact on recruitment and retention.

Leading the way

In the survey, members were asked which two organisations (e.g. institutions or associations) provide them with the most valuable resources and support on sustainability, as well as which companies they consider to be industry leaders in sustainability performance.

For valuable resources and support, the Building Research Establishment (BRE) was a clear leader.

The Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE) and Sponge were on par, followed closely by Construction Industry Research and Information Association (CIRIA).



▲ Priorities for industry vs age group

The members considered the BioRegional/Bill Dunster architects/BedZED combination to be the industry leader. Carillion, CIRIA and Arup were also named frequently. Again, feedback from the event suggests that this perception of industry leadership may be important for recruitment and retention.

Priorities for action

Following the results of the initial consultation event, a list of possible key issues was developed, including: climate change, social inclusion and accessibility, client leadership, health and wellbeing, empowerment/democracy, future generations, sense of community, standard of living/wealth and skills training. Members were asked to identify three key issues they believed were priorities for action by Sponge and the industry.



▲ Habitat for Humanity work in progress



▲ Habitat for Humanity wooden cladding



Issues for the industry to address are climate change (71%), client leadership (47%) and social inclusion and accessibility (40%). Training and recruitment/ retention were also raised as important issues at the consultation event.

Responses do not vary greatly between the age groups, however the older age group clearly feels more concerned about empowerment/democracy (17% vs 4%) and also skills training (44% vs 28%) than the younger group.

The priorities for Sponge action are more evenly spread, although climate change, education and leadership still top the list. Once again, results do not vary considerably between the age groups apart from 'sense of community', where the younger age group is more interested (43% vs 26%). However, the older group is again more interested in Sponge acting on skills training (57% vs 27%).

Other comments

A number of other comments were made by members during the survey:

- **Greatest ally:** own beliefs/commitment; own company's ethos and approach; working with colleagues and other organisations.
- **Factors in helping you to improve:** increasing the education of clients which increases demand; availability of more proven best practice examples and increased tools for implementation; commitment from managers/directors.
- **Main barriers:** lack of understanding; assumed increased costs; lack of legislation; lack of desire to change current business models.
- **Priorities for action:** taking a balanced view of sustainability; sustainability as a cornerstone of education in construction; the business case for improving sustainability performance; and a mix of voluntarism and regulation to improve performance.



Analysis & Recommendations

Academic education – only 50% of members rate their academic courses as providing sustainability coverage that is adequate or above, although this has improved from less than 30% for respondents aged over 35. See **1**

CPD education – very few (14%) of the respondents rate their CPD or further training as excellent or thorough. See **2**

Incentives – for young professionals, 'client demand' is the most effective factor for improving sustainability performance. See **3**

Barriers – young professionals highlight 'lack of proof of the business case' as a major barrier to improving performance. See **4**

'Lack of awareness' is also highlighted as a barrier; additional comments indicate that this particularly refers to clients. See **3**

Company performance – the lowest ratings for company performance included the use of targets and public reporting of performance. See **5**

Industry leadership – a small number of companies are leading the way and gaining the recognition for doing so; members emphasized that this has an influence on their choice of employment. See **6**

Information providers – the ICE is the only institution in the list of top information and guidance providers. See **7**

Audience – respondents were mainly members of Sponge, who are likely to have a good understanding of sustainability issues. The responses might be quite different if the survey was repeated with those less engaged with sustainability. See **8**

Priority issues – climate change, leadership (including clients) and social inclusion and accessibility are seen as priorities. See **9**

Recommendations

1 Academic education: further steps should be taken to improve the coverage of sustainability in academic education.

2 CPD and further education: CPD providers should increase the quality or depth of coverage of sustainability issues

3 Incentives: clients should be encouraged to adopt and specify a more sustainable approach, including efforts to improve their awareness of sustainability issues.

4 Barriers: proof of the business case for sustainability should be gathered and promoted; if proof does not exist, consideration should be given as to how the fiscal and regulatory framework could be amended to enhance the business case.

5 Company performance: companies should be encouraged to make information about their sustainability performance, including improvement targets, publicly available

6 Industry leadership: run a study to investigate the links between leadership and recruitment/retention.

7 Information providers: professional institutions should be encouraged to take a leadership role in promoting sustainability, possibly learning from the ICE's approach.

8 Second survey: the survey should be repeated with a similar-sized group of young construction professionals drawn at random from the industry.

9 Priority issues: nCRISP to investigate the impact of the built environment on social inclusion and accessibility

Funders

This survey would not have been possible without the sponsorship of the DTI Construction Directorate. A number of other organizations also provided additional support, including the Department of Trade and Industry and BRE.

BioRegional

dti
Department of Trade and Industry

BRE

Support

Sponge is kindly supported by Carnegie United Kingdom Trust, Polden Puckham Charitable Foundation and The Cobb Charity.

Sponge is a registered charity and has charitable objectives to promote sustainable development for the benefit of the public by: (1) the protection and conservation of the natural environment and the prudent use of natural resources; and (2) the advancement of education of the public in the principles and practice of sustainable development in the built environment and in urban and rural planning.

Working with BioRegional Development Group to turn Sponge vision into reality

EDWARD CULLINAN ARCHITECTS

FABER MAUNSELL

The Happold Trust