

# Inspectors who look the other way

Why won't anyone enforce our building standards?

**F**or 21 years builders in this country have been legally bound to construct homes which conserve energy. The building regulations tell them how much insulation they must use, what kind of windows they must fit and how good their draught-proofing will be. Guess how many builders have been prosecuted in that period for non-compliance. I won't keep you in suspense. The answer is none.

There could be only one good reason for this: that they are building houses so well that enforcement is unnecessary. But a study conducted by the Building Research Establishment, looking at just one factor (the rate at which cold air leaks in) found that 43% of the new houses it checked should have been failed by the inspectors. All of them had been passed. In some homes the requisite amount of insulation had been left in the lofts, but it was still tied up in bales. No one has been prosecuted because no one gives a damn.

A new survey of the people who are supposed to enforce our building rules – building control officers – published this month by the Energy Efficiency Partnership for Homes found that they treat the energy rules as a joke. Part of the problem is that since their profession was deregulated, many of them are involved in a standing conflict of interest. In the past, building control officers were employed by the council. Today builders hire “approved inspectors” to certify their houses. If the inspectors are too tough, they won't be hired again. As the major parties compete to cut red tape, businesses are seldom prosecuted for anything, let alone such a petty misdemeanor as

killing the planet.

Even if the officers wanted to enforce the rules, it is hard to see how they could. They inspect homes only towards the end of construction, when it is too late to see what's inside the walls. But the biggest problem appears to be their attitude. Several of them told the survey that they saw energy efficiency as a "trivial" matter, and would never dream of withholding a certificate because a house wasn't properly insulated. They saw their real job as ensuring that houses won't fall down or catch fire. No one was going to sue them if a building they had approved leaked heat. Poor energy efficiency, some of them said, is "not life threatening". Oh really?

In a letter to the Independent last week, Tadesse Dadi, an Ethiopian relief worker, reported that "we have not needed to wait for graphs to prove climate change is hurting us. We have seen it in increasing floods and droughts and decreasing and less predictable rainfall. These disrupted seasonal patterns leave millions at risk of starvation ... An 82-year-old farmer in northern Ethiopia, Mr Mengesha, recently told me that 30 years ago his harvest lasted his family for more than two years, but now erratic rains mean his sons barely harvest enough to last them seven months." His observations are supported by the science. Last year a paper published in the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society showed that "warm sea surface temperature[s] ... in the southern equatorial Indian Ocean produce an anomalous circulation that reduces rainfall" in Ethiopia. The short rains there have "fallen off consistently since 1996" as a result. The Stern review on climate change, which the government will publish in October, will show that temperatures in Africa are likely to rise about twice as fast as those in the rest of the world. I know it still seems improbable that shoddy building work in Exeter will kill people in Ethiopia, but this is the weird reality the science of climate change forces us to accept.

In fact a failure to enforce the building rules is perhaps more consequential than any other climate-changing policy. It guarantees high carbon emissions throughout the life of the buildings. Unless the inspectors start doing their jobs, the polluting legacy of the 200,000 new homes the government wants us to build every year will be far more deadly than nuclear waste.

Yvette Cooper, the housing minister, boasted this month that "energy efficiency standards are 40% higher than in 2002". That is not true. But even if it were, they are worthless if builders know that they will never be enforced. She also flourishes her new voluntary "code for sustainable homes", which urges builders to go green. It is hard to think of a better means of reinforcing the impression that energy efficiency is trivial. We don't have a voluntary code to prevent our houses from falling down. More constructively, she wants inspectors to be given more time in which to prosecute.

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Unfortunately, as the survey shows, they won't use it. The officers still have every incentive not to uphold the law.

But I can support the government when it says it wants to "simplify and streamline" the building regulations. My suggestion is that it reduces them to one sentence. "By 2010, no house in this country shall be built with a heating or cooling system."

This sounds ridiculous, outrageous. Does Monbiot want us all to freeze to death? Far from it. In Germany there are now some 4000 homes built to the "passivhaus" standard. A passivhaus is a house without radiators, fan heaters, stoves, air conditioners or any other kind of heating or cooling device. The only heat it requires is produced by sunlight coming through the windows and by the bodies of the people who live there. A study of over 100 passive homes showed they had a mean indoor temperature of 21.4 degrees during the bitter German winter. That's 2.4 degrees warmer than the average British home.

All that distinguishes them from other houses is that they are built properly. They are airtight (the air which enters the house comes through a heat exchange system) and have no "thermal bridges" – material which can conduct heat from the inside of the house to the outside. The windows are matched carefully to the volume of the house. Because they have no active heating systems, they are not much more expensive to build than ordinary houses. A development of 20 homes in Freiburg, with a measured energy saving of 79%, cost just 7% more than a typical building of the same kind.

I fail to see why the passivhaus cannot become a universal standard. But this standard – like all those the government might propose – will be a waste of time until our building control officers are forced to do their jobs properly. What is the point in investing in nuclear power, or any other generating technology, if we can't sort out something as simple as this?

The New Statesman reveals that in 1988, when Tony Blair was shadow energy secretary, he launched a passionate attack on the Conservatives' climate policies. "What is unbelievably depressing about the government's response," he said, "is that they see, in the evidence about greenhouse gases, not an opportunity to promote environmental concern but a chance to make the case for nuclear power. ... Having made a big issue of the greenhouse effect, it became clear that energy efficiency was the best way to deal with it, but ... the government's position has been characterised by a malign reluctance to have anything to do with the notion of energy conservation." What better description of his own legacy could there be?

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