

Professional Housebuilder and property Developer  
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The UK should follow Europe's lead in energy-efficient housing

Kevin Brennan, Head of Sustainability at VELUX Company Ltd, takes to the soapbox. Green issues have grown increasingly higher on the agenda over recent years, with the housebuilding industry taking the brunt of Government's aims to reduce the UK's carbon emissions. It is regularly touted that residential housing in the UK contributes to 27% of the country's total carbon emissions and as an industry, Housebuilders are under increasing pressure from Government to further improve the energy efficiency of new homes. While personally, I believe the biggest improvements would more likely be achieved through modifications to existing as opposed to new housing; and the Government is taking some measures to address this, albeit primarily through the much maligned introduction of Energy Performance Certificates (EPCs) last year; the reality is that its emphasis is on new homes and this is where it is likely to stay.

#### Realism

While I commend Government and its green ambitions, in an attempt to set radical and aspirational targets to drive Housebuilders in the direction of building homes, which achieve an ambitious level six against the Code for Sustainable Homes, it seems to be missing a trick. In its attempt to make a bold gesture, calling for all homes to be Zero Carbon by 2016, and as soon as 2012 in Wales, it is neglecting the opportunity to take smaller, simpler, more practical steps that could in fact make a more significant and realistic contribution towards reducing the UK's carbon emissions. It is becoming increasingly clear that by setting targets, which essentially are difficult to achieve in the current market place, the Government is in fact hindering rather than helping its own ambitions to improve the energy efficiency of our new housing stock. Introducing a series of step changes, which could be more easily implemented, would offer a much more sensible and realistic solution.

#### Clarity

While Government's targets are pushing developers in the right

direction, greater clarity and guidance is needed to ensure practical steps are being introduced to make its targets a reality. Currently, individual developers are advancing at different rates, using different technologies across different developments and investing varying levels of finance in the necessary eco technologies and techniques. With this disparity in the market, the likelihood of reaching Government's end goal looks to be increasingly unlikely within the current time frame.

## Europe

The UK is currently lagging behind Europe when it comes to building energy-efficient homes. In countries such as Spain, legislation is already in place to ensure that eco technologies such as solar thermal, which can help to significantly reduce a home's carbon emissions, are made mandatory across the new-build market. This is a policy our Government needs to adopt, and sooner rather than later. A blanket policy, such as the one enforced in Spain, which demands that all new homes that can benefit from solar thermal have this technology installed, is a necessary next step for the UK. If our Government is really serious about reducing the current carbon emissions released from our homes then it needs to introduce similar legislation now. Solar thermal is one of the few truly tried and tested eco technologies currently on the market. It is compatible with over 75% of the UK's existing homes and could become an integral part of the housebuilding process if the Government would take the necessary steps to introduce legislation making this essential technology mandatory across the new build market.

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Given the current low volumes and cottage industry, the costs to manufacture and install technologies, such as solar hot water systems, are unnecessarily high. However, if the use of this technology became mandatory, the product and installation costs would fall significantly allowing Housebuilders to significantly improve the energy efficiency of their new homes, at minimal cost. Despite many misconceptions, solar technology does not need direct sunlight to be effective. The technology will work just as effectively in the UK as it does in European destinations such as Spain, where it is now common place, so why is our Government lagging behind? Why is it failing to introduce essential legislation that is proven, over the longer term, to reduce carbon emissions, while allowing developers to get closer to its Code level six target and at the same time driving down the costs of a tried and tested technology that can transform the way we heat water in the home? Solar thermal can provide up to 70% of a home's hot water requirements and in

countries such as Spain it is already doing this. It's time the UK caught up and took the necessary steps to make running our homes more energy and cost efficient.