

9th August 2021



CECA Wales Monday Briefing

Carbon - how are we going to tackle this challenge?

This is my second piece on carbon in the last month and follows hot on the heels of our Annual Conference on “Decarbonising Our Infrastructure” (<https://www.ceca.co.uk/decarbonising-our-infrastructure/>). I might as well be upfront about this - this probably won't be the last piece on carbon either! Given all that is happening across our sector this is THE issue that we must tackle and not just in the roads sector. It's a challenge for all sectors from transportation in all its forms to the water sector and from energy to flood defences. We'll launch our post-Conference report, hopefully, in September which will set out some of the things that we at CECA Wales, at ACE and County Surveyors Society Cymru feel needs to change. But, whatever we think, we need to see all the fine words and aspirations being converted into practical change “on the ground”. And quickly!

Ultimately, if you can't measure something you can't manage it. And that is the reality if we are to manage carbon. So, what does this mean for contractors and what can we do? Well, if you're only brought into the project development process at the latter stages, there are limitations on what we can deliver. We heard, at our conference that there is a “carbon cost tipping point” in a project process where, if zero carbon is to be achieved, costs are likely to increase during the latter stages of a project. So, getting the procurement process right is important if the impact of contractors is to be felt earlier in a project lifecycle rather than just during the construction stage when it's likely to add to costs.

What are clients doing in this area. It feels like early days! In Wales, through the Welsh Construction Forum, industry is seeking to support and influence the direction of travel but we need to see some urgency in this area. It is difficult to agree a common basis for carbon measurement but let's not inhibit progress by seeking out perfection before we start. We just need to “have a go”, make some judgements, and take some risks. And maybe have some “cross-Client” collaboration?!

Is Building Information Modelling (BIM) part of the solution? It should be but let's face it BIM is still not widely applied by all so we need something simple, that we can all reasonably agree on, to measure carbon impacts, to get us moving. Otherwise we end up ignoring carbon impacts entirely.

And what about a role for the National Infrastructure Commission for Wales (NICW)? It's no surprise that we and many across the sector have been disappointed by the lack of impact from the Commission. Yes, it remains poorly resourced but if it fails to lead on the debate on carbon impacts and infrastructure then is there any point in having it - and who should lead on this major issue instead?

Is it realistic, given all that we're seeing on climate change impacts across the globe, for any infrastructure project in Wales to receive investment with little or no reflection of the carbon impact? Should any project come to the marketplace now without an assessment of its carbon impact, what has been done to reduce impacts through the design and planning stages and what can realistically be achieved through the construction stage?

But as contractors we still have a part to play even if procurement processes mean we're not fully involved in the early stages of projects. There are things we can do to reduce carbon, even in the latter stages of a project. We can rethink the way we construct for a start. Let's face it offsite manufactured products have been used in the civils sector for a long time whether that be in drainage or in the various structures that are built offsite, transported and then assembled. And we could do more if clients and designers were more ready to specify low carbon materials and/or accept alternative bids and specifications. We can adopt more modern “low carbon” plant to construct although let's be clear that technology is not yet where it needs to be. The removal of the red diesel rebate will drive some change although it's a blunt tool to effect change. And in defence of the much maligned roads sector there is much going on in terms of materials technology which would reduce carbon if only the confidence levels of clients and designers could be raised to make such materials acceptable to them.

So, as contractors, we need to get out there and explore the art of the possible and put that in front of clients. And we need to avoid, above all costs, clients putting ridiculous requirements on contractors which can't be achieved and we enter another “passing the buck” game - as we sometimes see it with social value! The reality is that the major reductions in carbon impacts are to be found by clients and designers in the early project development stages - not the latter construction stages. Yes, contractors, still have a big role to play in materials technology and construction techniques but clients, designers and specifiers need to build in carbon considerations from the outset.

It shouldn't come down to more PQQ questions on carbon for contractors to answer at tender stage. That'll be a failure. We need to see a shift in client/designer/contractor relationships to measure carbon at the early stages of a project, optimise option appraisals with carbon as a key factor with contractors adding the “innovative” final touches!

CECA Wales Political Update

Both the Senedd and Westminster are in summer recess and so political updates will be limited for the next few weeks apart from specific issues. However, I am continuing to meet with Senedd Members and MPs over the summer period to ensure that the profile of infrastructure matters is maintained. We are also pursuing further actions for the Welsh Construction Forum as we build on the work done over the last 12 months.

CECA Wales Director Activities

Some of my activities from last week are summarised here :

- Meetings CITB Cymru to explore opportunities to support schools and colleges in delivering new Construction and Built Environment GCSE and A-level qualifications
- Meeting Welsh Government officers to finalise arrangements for the next phase of work for the Welsh Construction Forum
- Meeting the procurement and social value teams of the SEW Civil Engineering Framework CECA to prepare for the re-tendering exercise and how social value can be better delivered
- Finalising industry guidebook on Project Bank Accounts
- Reviewing draft of the CECA Wales post-Conference report on Decarbonising Our Infrastructure
- Meeting members to discuss concerns over increasing material costs, labour availability and red diesel

Client engagement and business opportunities

I continue to attend governance board meetings of the SEW Civil Engineering Framework. This framework delivers services for local authorities in southeast Wales and arrangements are currently underway to retender. CECA Wales are supporting with this development and seeking to ensure a fair, focused and proportionate tendering process. Last week we focused on the social value aspects of the framework and how support structures can be developed to support contractors in delivering greater social value. The PQQ is due to be issued in August with returns by October 2021.

I met with senior Welsh Government officers to drive forward the second phase of actions for the Welsh Construction Forum based on the 6 priority areas identified by industry. We hope to inform who will chair the Forum shortly so that we can launch the outputs that have already been developed.

Training Events

Please note that our events programme for 2021 is available via our website. Keep an eye out as the programme will be constantly refreshed throughout the year. Here's the link <https://www.ceca.co.uk/wales/events/>

Our series of NEC4 workshops for members are well underway. The next workshops will be held on October 7th, 14th and 20th and 3rd, 4th and 8th November. Further details on how to register will be issued to all members plus you can view details via our website <https://www.ceca.co.uk/wales/event/nec4-communication-flow-and-the-role-of-the-project-manager/>

Presentations from the recent CECA Wales Annual Conference on "Decarbonising Our Infrastructure" are now available via our website <https://www.ceca.co.uk/decarbonising-our-infrastructure/>