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Low carbon and nature positive must go hand-in-hand

Two initiatives on nature positive design and carbon reduction for the built environment look set to change industry practice on sustainability. While they focus on distinct areas, it's increasingly apparent that reversing systemic environmental damage requires a broad array of solutions working in harmony.

Why a shift to nature positive is critical for both the planet and your bottom line.

When it comes to winning work, the prevailing wind is blowing towards demonstrating strong environmental, social, and governance (ESG) credentials. It's partly driven by pressure from clients and shareholders that are focussed on sustainability. But while much attention has focussed on carbon performance, stakeholders are now increasingly aware of the need to be nature positive which is adherence to a position where species and ecosystems are being restored and are regenerating rather than declining.

In the UK, for example, there's a clear business imperative since most developments seeking planning permission from January 2024 must deliver a minimum 10 percent uplift on a site's current biodiversity, with some local planning authorities targeting more. This will see applicable sites put through a metric developed by Natural England, the government's adviser for the natural environment. This metric provides a biodiversity score that must be exceeded by 10 percent once the development's completed.

To get ready for such initiatives, construction industry firms are already signing up to be nature positive by adopting the recommendations made within the internationally recognised Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures (TNFD) framework that was published in September. Critically for their supply chains, these companies are already examining which businesses can provide them with products and materials that aren't just zero carbon but are also nature positive. The firms that can satisfy this need are not only well positioned to become suppliers of choice but will actually be positioning their businesses as marketable entities.

Damon Schünmann,
Insights consultant for Barbour ABI

Nature positive clients

A full list of TNFD forum member companies that have already aligned with its mission and principles, and will likely be assessing their supply chains, can be found here.

While market forces are already driving take-up, the UK is likely to see supportive legislation in the near future. Indeed, conversations in

the industry about TNFD compliance aren't so much about whether it will become mandatory, so much as when this will be, with a general expectation of within three years.

Companies that are ambitious on sustainability see the writing on the wall in terms of maintaining a competitive edge. Many of these have previously complied with a similar, but climate-focussed regime called the Task Force on Climate-Related Financial Disclosures (TCFD), which passed into UK law in 2022.

These businesses – many of whose corporate financial performance is based on whether they meet their net zero targets – already have structures in place that will serve for TNFD, as it's essentially modelled on TCFD. These organisations can start to incorporate a nature positive aspect to the governance they've already established for carbon.

Fortunately for those that are further behind on sustainability compliance, the TNFD is a useful framework in its own right. It does this by navigating a path via an assessment of impacts and dependencies on nature and provides clarity and a footprint. Even though the resulting picture is often more detrimental than expected, users can see what actions are needed to get to nature positive.

The first step is to pick up TNFD, understand what nature positive is and apply it. You certainly won't be alone because few organisations are yet to rigorously assess all their impacts on nature. To do so will call for innovation, not least through the need to consolidate many different datasets, but the good news is that TNFD gently takes you through what's required through its 'LEAP' approach of locate, evaluate, assess, and prepare.

To find out more and begin your nature positive journey, download the TNFD recommendations here.

A recent and potentially game-changing release of carbon data for infrastructure offers the chance for meaningful reductions on future projects.

While we know that the built environment is responsible for an estimated 40 percent of global carbon emissions, part of the problem is the scarcity of both industry data sharing and reliable benchmarks.

'If you can't measure it, you can't manage it', goes the saying, and so a step towards addressing this is a game changing new tool. The Built Environment Carbon Database (BECD) can help close the gap for carbon reduction targets. The publicly available BECD is being developed by a consortium of infrastructure organisations, led by the Building Cost Information Service (BCIS).

An initial substantial body of infrastructure carbon data for highways projects has been

uploaded to the BECD for highways. Supplied by consultant Mott MacDonald, following client approval, it incorporates data collected from seven years' worth of projects. These include a range of highway types and constituent elements such as bridges and roundabouts, which together can portray the carbon impact for new projects.

When a new highway is being conceived, the system can produce an asset-level assessment of the likely carbon intensity from materials as well as construction activity emissions for various design solutions. These are drawn from comparable highway projects that have previously been measured against industry-standard databases such as the ICE, along with specification information from supply chains.

Accuracy is improved because the database contains multiple projects of a given type, and this will further increase with the ongoing addition of new projects, something the BCIS is keen to receive from other construction businesses. Simply put, the more data that is added to the BECD, the more valuable it will become for all.

Measurement drives integrity

The BECD also opens the door for informed and constructive challenges in the industry, as a shared reference point introduces much-needed transparency and integrity. Companies will only be able to claim its solutions are driving down carbon if emissions are demonstrably lower than for equivalent projects represented in the database.

This supports a theme highlighted in the 2023 revision to PAS 2080, the global standard for managing infrastructure carbon, co-authored by Mott MacDonald. It's a revision that includes an emphasis on benchmarks to aid decision making in the early stages of projects.

BCIS CEO James Fisks is passionate about the need to share data in a transparent, responsible way. "The only way we can be sure that we are making the right decisions to reduce the environmental impact of our activities in the built environment is to learn from and share data with each other," he says. "The BECD is designed to facilitate this.

"The clock is ticking and we can no longer hold back on sharing anything that could help in our fight against climate change. This doesn't mean losing your competitive advantage – more central data storage benefits everyone and helps reduce risk," he adds.

Multi-sector rollout

Mott MacDonald UK and Europe climate change lead, Kim Yates explains that carbon modelling for highways is just the start. "For the benefit of all, BECD will be expanding; we will be contributing data we hold for rail, energy and water projects in coming months. We invite you to do the same," she says.

BCIS launched the database in October via a webinar that explains how the BECD works and how you can both access and submit data.

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