In November 2013 we held an online discussion between UK-GBC members about BREEAM Communities.

Want to add to the conversation? The comments that came out of the discussion have been added to Pinpoint and can be read here. This document is a summary of the wide ranging debate on the rating tool.

Introduction

BREEAM Communities is an assessment method that helps professionals design places that people want to live and work in, are good for the environment and are economically successful. It is a third party certification scheme operated by BRE (Building Research Establishment) Global.

General industry view of BREEAM Communities

The original BREEAM Communities scheme was considered to be complicated and there was a certain degree of cynicism by planners and developers about the appropriateness of it. However the consensus is that the new scheme has become simpler, more straight-forward and aligned with the planning system representing tangible ‘good planning’. It lets a development team see how the different aspects of planning combine to make a good scheme and reduces or even eliminates silo thinking therefore reducing planners’ workloads. It also allows the sharing of responsibility for good planning between the developer and local authority by setting clear but flexible objectives to achieve at least a good basic level of performance around sustainability and also enables faster approvals due to addressing the basic requirements of the local authority.

1 See contributors end the end of this document.
Some comments from users of BREEAM Communities:

“Not only does it [BREEAM Communities] halve the time that I spent … before I get to committee, but more importantly it seems to provide both a guarantee and an accreditation that a development will be sustainable as defined in the NPPF, which at the end of the day is what we all want, what we are all after.”

Louise Cutts, Development Management Officer, Eastleigh Borough Council

“Overall it [BREEAM Communities] helped us secure planning approval and it helped us secure the project.”

Dave Bullock, Managing Director, Compendium Living

“BREEAM Communities is a planning vehicle but it’s actually so much more, for me ast a group perspective, 20% of the value is in the planning and 80% is in the conversation you have about your development, how that team works and how that subsequent development expresses itself. This structure… give(s) guidance to the architects, the quantity surveyors, infrastructure professionals to start thinking collaboratively in the right direction. … We had to be ahead of the curve, and the BREEAM Communities sustainable framework enabled us to do that”

Iain Taylor, Partnerships Director, Peel Group

When BREEAM Communities should be used

It is important BREEAM Communities is applied at the earliest possible stages, ideally before the formal pre application as a reference point during initial discussions to get the best outcome with least increase in cost. It was suggested, the requirement for a certain ‘level’ should not put developers off using the scheme when, for instance, it becomes clear that an “Excellent” level cannot be achieved, say for smaller schemes. Even achieving the mandatory levels would achieve better development than not considering any of the issues.

Benefits of BREEAM Communities

Using BREEAM Communities demonstrates, in a planning application, that all the basic planning issues have been considered, making the planning application process less adversarial and smoother for all parties involved. This includes helping; the Local Planning Association (LPA) officer because it reduces workload, the developers because it avoids wasting time in endless planning discussions without a clear objective and achieves a decision quickly, local politicians because it provides a definable and certified set of criteria to prove a development is ‘sustainable’ thereby engaging the presumption in favour of sustainable development in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Furthermore it assists with public consultation and also provides a ‘third party’ assessment- this is useful for public committee meetings.

Areas for improvement

The standard could look to include issues around heritage/local historic interest in relation to ‘sense of place’, which is a big omission in parts of the UK.

Other areas for suggested incorporation include issues such as quality of the place, a sense of scale, and rewarding good design, possibly combining with the Building for Life assessment. Post occupancy evaluation isn’t currently a requirement and probably should be to review the development in operation.

More work could be done to promote BREEAM Communities, perhaps through trade press or even seminars at the Planning Summer School or the Planning Convention.
BRE Global have worked towards making improvements and raising awareness of the scheme through a number of ways:

- The first day of the ‘BREEAM Communities Assessor Training’ can be attended as a standalone module designed to provide a general introduction to the scheme. The training discusses and demonstrates how BREEAM Communities can be used in the planning process and the benefits for; planning, community engagement, sustainability and costs. This first day is attended by developers, planners and consultants who want more information about the scheme and is free to attend for planners or those working for charitable organisations, there is a small charge of £75 for all others to cover basic costs.
- BRE Global also offers half-day training sessions for local authorities or other interested groups to raise awareness of BREEAM Communities.
- BRE Global have created 4 case studies and 4 videos to help sell the benefits of using BREEAM Communities. These are all on the BREEAM website at www.breeam.org/communities. This process of capturing lessons learnt takes time for BREEAM Communities projects as a result of their scale leading to a longer timeframe to get from start to finish.
- BRE Global have developed a ‘facts and figures’ document (The Case for BREEAM Communities) that helps assessors and planners explain the benefits of using this scheme. This is based on a recent qualitative feedback and evaluation event involving representatives from project teams that have used BREEAM Communities.

BRE Global have a monitoring system in place to evaluate how the assessment system is affecting developments in terms of holistic sustainability and the design and planning process. To date there have only been nine certified projects so data is limited making it difficult to make meaningful claims (there is also the added complication of the old and new schemes which are very different). BRE Global have also funded a PhD student at UCL to evaluate the impact of BREEAM Communities on the development process.

BRE Global have committed to developing a Post-Construction Check for BREEAM Communities and held an ‘Expert Group Workshop’ in early November 2013 to explore and scope out the possibilities for this tool. The early development work has started and updates will be communicated to assessors and during awareness sessions.

**Applicability**

The scheme is suitable for all developments but there is a natural threshold of development size below which BREEAM Communities is not appropriate and certain credits become very difficult to achieve. Some participants suggested formal BREEAM Communities certification would not be appropriate for schemes below 200 units due to cost implications of achieving credits however there is no reason why it cannot be used as a design guide. There was a suggestion that BRE Global could look to develop a ‘BREEAM Communities Simple Development’ - along the same lines as BREEAM New Construction 2011 Simple Buildings.

**Barriers to increased take up of BREEAM Communities**

Perceptions of BREEAM in general still remain a stumbling block and many people see any type of BREEAM or indeed any standards assessment process as being a tick box exercise and adding time and cost. However the participants suggested that BREEAM Communities is more flexible compared with other BREEAM schemes and can in fact save time and cost as well as positively impact the project outcomes. These benefits need to be clearly communicated so that developers can clearly see that BREEAM Communities can enhance their brand and ‘product’, this could be through case studies. Equally there needs to be wider public communications around the benefits of buying property in a BREEAM Communities development.
Whilst BRE Global can encourage wider awareness raising of BREEAM Communities, Local Authorities could do the same too and potentially make it a planning requirement. Understanding of BREEAM Communities is still relatively low particularly among project managers who understand BREEAM New Construction but struggle with the intangible elements of BREEAM Communities which could be considered relevant to another part of the project delivery.

In the BREEAM Communities training that BRE Global run for local authorities it is often suggested that ‘encouraging’ the use of this scheme is one option that planners can consider if ‘requiring’ it is not possible. Of the certified projects BRE Global have, about half were ‘required’ and half were entirely voluntary on the part of the developer.

**What BREEAM rating level should be set**

There was differing of opinion around if and what rating level should be prescribed by a Local Authority e.g. ‘Very Good’ or ‘Excellent’. At the pre-assessment stage there could be opportunities to improve the score and having a higher target could incentivise better project outcomes.

In a few cases project teams are proactive and will be working towards the best quality outcome and do not necessarily require a specific target applied to them which can in fact have negative implications of chasing points that don’t actually add value to the specific development. In fact the framework provides more of a basis for the facilitation of broader discussions about how a place will work and focuses the design team to deliver a sustainable development in its broadest sense. What would add value in the much longer term is revisiting measures once the development has been occupied for some years to assess which criteria are seen by residents and key local stakeholders as contributing more or less to the overall success and sustainability of the place.

**Housing Standards Review and associated implications**

The Housing Standards Review is the Government’s review into housing standards. The current understanding is that the Review should not affect Local Authorities requiring BREEAM Communities on developments as BREEAM Communities is not purely housing focussed, unlike the Government’s housing standard Code for Sustainable Homes (CSH). While the Government has indicated that it will wind down the CSH they have yet to provide guidance to local authorities on the exact planning implications of this.

**Recognition by the public**

Issues such as proximity to transport, accessible local services, good walking and cycling networks, and sustainable homes are all good points that people often consider positively when buying. Having the standard, should be a marker for people, that the scheme has been designed sustainably. But other factors such as good schools and access to employment will still dominate choices, as well as spatial and comfort considerations.

BREEAM Communities also draws strongly on the social and economic aspects, not just environmental. It covers a variety of issues including: economic impact, housing provision, services and amenities, design of the public realm, local vernacular, inclusive design, training and skills, and more. This category is highly weighted in the scoring process and is viewed as an essential aspect of creating a sustainable community.

**Conclusion**

The overarching opinion of those using BREEAM Communities is positive and all have found value in applying the scheme to new developments. There is more work to be done to raise awareness of BREEAM Communities but BRE Global are taking positive steps towards creating a greater awareness.
Thank you to the following who contributed to this discussion:

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