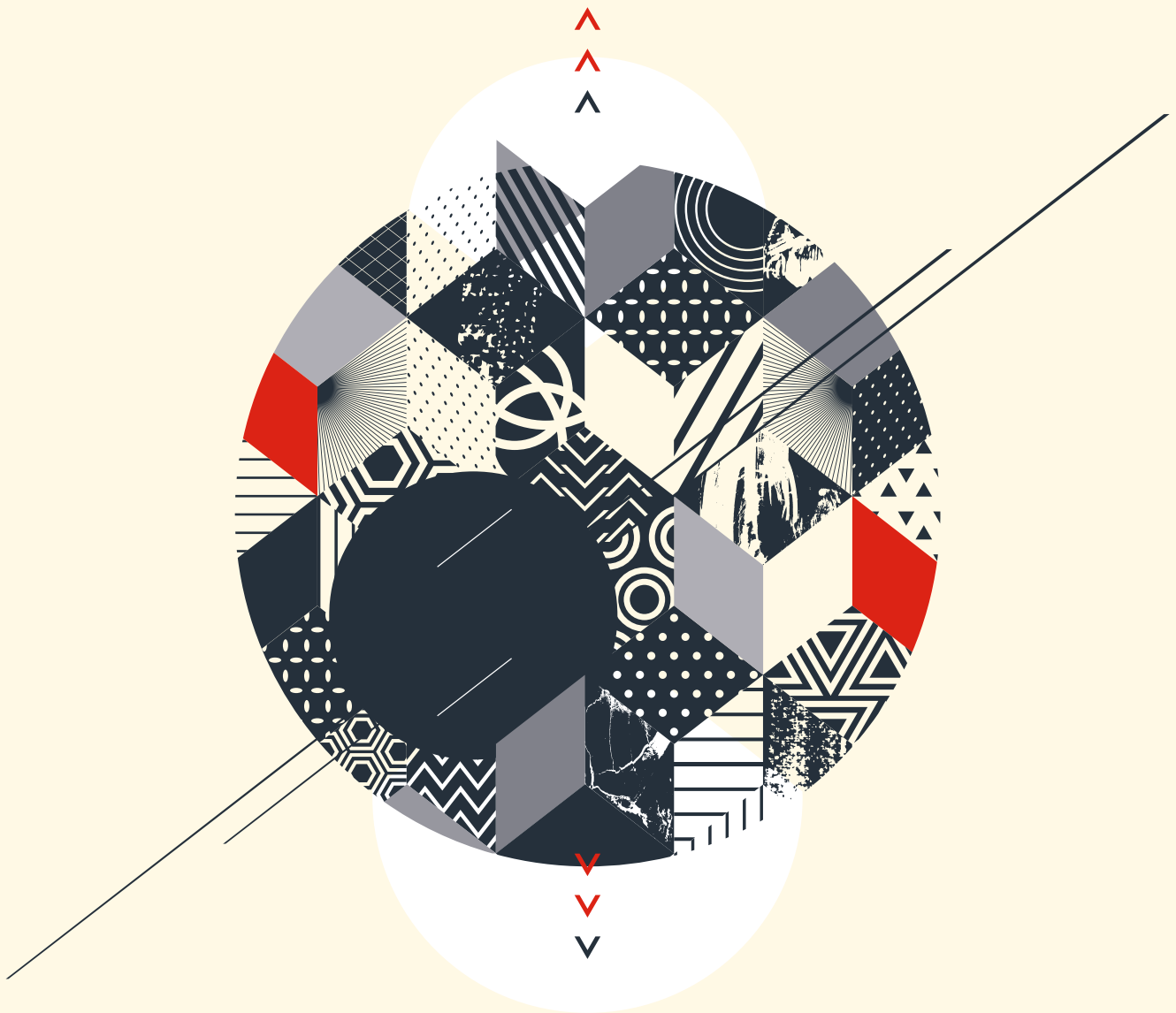


BATH 19 JANUARY, 2017
GUEST SPEAKER **CHARLES SECRETT** PRESENTED:

“THE DRIVERS FOR SUSTAINABILITY IN
CONSTRUCTION AND THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT”



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At a local, national and global level business as usual simply isn't working when it comes to construction and the urban environment, and the cost of inaction is becoming increasingly clear.

Kim Vernau, CEO, BLP Insurance highlights the key points raised at an interactive discussion organised for industry peers on the drivers for sustainability in construction and the urban environment. Guest speaker Charles Secrett, co-founder of The Robertsbridge Group, led the thought provoking debate on the essential roles and responsibilities for insurers, construction professionals and city planners to help accelerate a sustainable and prosperous future.

INTRODUCTION

The insurance sector, construction professionals and urban planners face complex demands and a turbulent policy environment which often appear to hinder action rather than easing the way for a collaborative approach. To help achieve truly sustainable development and drive solutions to combat embedded economic, environmental and social problems it is more important than ever that our working practices are aligned.

Overcoming the difficulty of 'doing things right' means navigating four deeply rooted and inter-connected factors: namely, the dynamic between the natural environment, economic imperatives, social and community impact, and bolder, better decision making.

THE MEANING OF SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability is a complex word which holds different meaning for different people. Traditionally associated with environmentalism, it has transformed throughout the years from a focus on natural resources and ecosystems, towards economic development, social development and environmental protection.

The term sustainable development only came to light in the late 1990s at a summit in Rio de Janeiro, when it was given its first overarching definition: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". This went a step further in 2000 when the UN defined seventeen sustainable development goals to make global progress on poverty, education, health, hunger and the environment.

In truth, sustainability is more than just a word, it's a concept and something that needs to be considered in a way that is useful to businesses, sectors and to us as individuals. Rather than assigning it a loose definition, it should be a set of principles; an approach and methodology for development that's about solving worldwide problems and, by doing so, creating much needed opportunities. It requires us not just to see the world in a different way, but to act differently too.

DISRUPTION IS COMING

With the inevitability of technological developments, every sector and every industry is being disrupted. The housing sector is no exception. Against the backdrop of a housing supply crisis in the UK, exacerbated

by shortages in skilled labour and materials, off-site construction methods and modular housing techniques provide a clear solution. But it's completely conceivable that the workforce for this construction process could be taken over by intelligent robotics in the future and, much the same as self-driving vehicles, we need to consider the social consequences.

In this respect, technological development and disruption is a double-edged sword and one which we need to learn how to use wisely. So fast and so extensive are these changes that society is struggling to keep up. We need evidence-based decision making, driven by results that promote resilience, stability, adaptability and importantly, investment. This requires greater collaboration across sectors, governments, communities and generations to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes.

Ultimately, disruption comes about because of the amalgamation of the actions of millions of individuals and companies across the world. It comes down to personal values and choices. From this perspective, SMEs are potentially even more important and influential than larger companies because of the role they play as generators of jobs and sustainable growth. The opportunity to contribute to change is there, regardless of the sector you fall into or the size of your business.

NO ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL SOLUTION

Throughout history we've taken a silo-based approach to decision making, behaving as though we live in a static and linear world where the consequences of our actions are limited and carry little bearing on others. In businesses, this has led to attitudes that prioritise competition. We've seen communities become increasingly individualistic and divided from one another. Instead, we need to see the world as a set of interlocking and inter-related systems if we're going to achieve the right sort of development at both a local and global level.

There is no quick and easy silver bullet solution. An attitude that big is always better has seen billions and billions of pounds poured into large one-off development projects, rather than seeing the merits of spreading the investment across the country where it's needed the most. We need joined up thinking and actions that lead to multiple benefits and solutions.

Decision making around development needs to be more than just two-dimensional. First, we need to consider



all the major stakeholder groups; from individuals, households, companies, social organisations and government, both at a national and local level. Then we need to take into account all of the tools at our disposal, including taxes, policies, spending, laws, advice and guidance. Ultimately, it's a Rubik's cube of development that we need to play around with until the sides match up and we reach appropriate solutions.

TAKING SUSTAINABILITY A STEP FURTHER

Larger companies are falling over themselves to get on the sustainability bandwagon. Consumers, the public sector and partners along the supply chain are increasingly expecting and demanding high environmental and social performance, whether that's through a company's operations, its services or the products produced.

Instead of being viewed as an added bolt-on, sustainability is increasingly being viewed as a key responsibility of every organisation and a core part of the business plan. The merits of developing a sustainable-based business plan are numerous, namely gaining competitive advantage and building brand reputation among stakeholders, whether that's at a local, regional, national or global level.

There is a clear shift underway in business behaviour in terms of taking on board sustainability as a priority, but we now need to take how we view sustainable development a step further. We now have the technology in place to utilise buildings as individual power stations, producing self-sufficient clean energy for the owner with surplus then sold back to the grid or used as part of a genuinely community based sustainable energy scheme, to power streets, neighbourhoods, and potentially whole towns and cities. The opportunity for buildings isn't just limited to pollution, waste and climate responsibilities, it's about thinking about the role of a building in a very different way.

One of the key business barriers to sustainability, hindered by current policy frameworks, is the focus on short-term performance indicators. Looking at the anticipated costs over the lifetime of a building, it makes sense to maximise its energy efficiency, using environmentally sustainable products and materials and potentially even a self-generating energy supply. However, all too often, the perceived initial capital outlay means that traditional builders often don't go for green.

Businesses of all sizes need to be proactive, ambitious and provide direction for change. This means evaluating costs from an environmental and social perspective as well as from purely a financial and economic stance. Spreading impact can only truly take hold by mobilising across the whole supply chain. An environment of learning from others across the sector is key to share knowledge and to spread skills and understanding.

THE ROLE FOR POLICY

If businesses are going to behave in a certain way and produce certain desired outcomes, it's imperative that there is a supporting policy framework. National policy is critical and as individuals, and through professional trade bodies and associations there are priorities which we need to stand up as advocates for.

We need a national policy framework which works across the country and which serves to build local and regional economies, increasing productivity, innovation and clean, efficient jobs-rich work. We need an industrial strategy out of Whitehall whilst also considering the merits of reintroducing regional development agencies once again. And of course, we also need a skills agenda and apprenticeship schemes which actually work at bringing new people into jobs, helping them to learn new skills in a way that's also affordable for companies.

CONCLUSION

We are quickly reaching our ecological, social and economic limits. There is no quick and easy 'magic bullet' solution, but desirable outcomes and the means to achieve them can be identified that will affect how we work, the products we deliver, and a safer, securer style of urban regeneration benefitting present and future generations.

As we stand on the brink, we have a responsibility to work together and pull our weight, whether that's as individuals, companies, communities or political parties. It's in our grasp to achieve sustainability if we can frame development in the right way, but it needs to be seen not as a cost but as an opportunity.

Charles Secrett is one of the country's leading sustainability analysts and advisors. In addition to his work as co-founder of The Robertsbridge Group – a specialist consultancy on strategic sustainability for business – he helps shape practical sustainability solutions for a wide range of NGOs, government bodies, agencies and corporations, in the UK and overseas.



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IMAGES FROM 19 JANUARY, 2017, AT LUCKNAM PARK HOTEL & SPA, WILTSHIRE



An interactive discussion on the essential roles and responsibilities for insurers, construction professionals and city planners to help accelerate a sustainable and prosperous future.

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