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CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND THE UK HOUSEBUILDING INDUSTRY

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most obvious tests of the construction industry's commitment to corporate social responsibility concerns the development of new homes for owner occupation, in which business success is marked by explicit engagement with the varied and changing agendas of government and the home-buying public. The emergence of a specialist house-building sector can be seen as a distinctive feature of the UK construction industry that reflects both the rapid growth of owner-occupation in the postwar years and the development of specialist financial systems to facilitate wider access to mortgage funding. Although rising real incomes have encouraged consumers to purchase housing increasingly for investment as well as use, few homeowners commission an architect to design a bespoke product and a builder to implement that individual design.

Instead mass production characterises UK housebuilding in a similar manner to the production of many other consumer durables. As a result, those who own and occupy residential property in the long term find themselves subservient in key decisions on its design and construction to housebuilders, whose short-term interest lies in rapid completion and departure for the next building site. This separation between the use and investment interest on the one hand and the development interest on the other has caused longstanding tension between the housebuilding industry and its customers. In this sense, the emergence of corporate social responsibility represents not a wholly new challenge for housebuilding but rather a broadening of the older challenge of tackling short-termism in an industry whose products are intended to last significantly longer than most other consumer durables.

A useful insight into the extent to which particular businesses and industries are prepared to think more broadly is apparent in their engagement with Business in the Community (BITC). Since its foundation in 1982, BITC has grown to a movement of over 700 member companies, including 75 of those listed in the FTSE 100. Although its members include the UK's top two commercial property development companies (British Land and Land Securities) along with some important names in construction and property consultancy, membership among the leading housebuilders is sparse, with only half of the UK's top 10 housebuilders having membership of BITC. In addition, it is conspicuous that one of BITC's current initiatives, that of helping to alleviate the crisis in rural housing, lists ten exemplary case studies involving housing associations, community land trusts or private landowners but not one that involves a major housebuilder. Is the housebuilding industry

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simply slow off the mark in recognising its wider responsibilities or is there something about the business of housebuilding that makes it narrowly focused?

At the time when BITC was founded in response to the urban unrest of the early 1980s, corporate social responsibility (CSR) meant little more than sponsoring sporting events or helping to clean up despoiled beaches. With the rise of the sustainable development agenda from the late 1980s and the emergence of new forms of governance in the 1990s, the concept of CSR has since changed significantly. In a series of reports (DTI, 2001, 2002 and 2004), the Labour Government re-defined and actively promoted the concept of CSR as part of its broader agenda to reconstitute relations between state and market. In a whole series of policy arenas, the Government sought to overturn the long-standing adversarial relationship between the state and the market and instead draw the private sector into policy formulation and implementation by means of partnership to achieve shared goals and common purpose. CSR thus became “essentially about behaviours that go beyond basic legal compliance” (DTI, 2002, p. 7) through which UK businesses take account of their economic, social and environmental impacts to help address key sustainable development challenges (DTI, 2004). Although the Government is committed to the creation of fiscal and regulatory frameworks that encourage rather than hinder CSR, it recognises both the voluntary nature of CSR and the crucial need to encourage the corporate sector to ‘go the extra mile’ beyond that required by regulation, if development is to be ever to become truly sustainable.

Nevertheless, the Government’s appeal for greater CSR, or more responsible business behaviour as it is sometimes termed, is not directed merely to the goodness of executives’ hearts but rather to their enlightened self-interest. Cannily, for example, it argues that close attention to CSR is an indispensable component of modern business management along with actions to “build brand value, foster customer loyalty, motivate their staff and contribute to a good reputation among a wide variety of stakeholders” (DTI, 2002, page 2). Moreover, as the Financial Times (2004) commented “Responsible business behaviour has been equated with risk management, placing it high on boardroom agendas. Fear of lawsuits or legislation has hastened the adoption of social, environmental and ethical programmes. However, some companies are seeing not just risk but opportunity in making a positive contribution to society.” Such sentiments, of course, call for a particular type of management and a particular type of business organisation and are grounded in modern management theory and literature. For example, in setting out the business case for CSR, the Government argues that: “The key was to look at CSR as an investment in a strategic asset or distinctive capability, rather than as an expense.” (DTI, 2005, p.1)

Although we take as a starting point for our analysis in this chapter, the UK Government’s concerted attempt to define CSR as a link between the implementation of its sustainable development agenda and its particular concept of multi-level and multi-agency governance, it is important to pause and acknowledge other perspectives and other initiatives. A simpler definition of CSR, which allows it to stand independently of government policy, suggests that: “CSR is about how companies manage the business process to produce an overall positive impact on society” (Baker, 2005, p. 1). Moreover, the widespread interest in CSR across the industrialised world by non-governmental organisations as well as governments is shown, for example, by Business Ethics Online¹, the US magazine of corporate responsibility, in the international emphasis of the Corporate Social Responsibility Forum² and in the conferences organised by the CSR campaign³. The latter once made the rather worrying claim that “Like the Olympic Games, a CSR torch is carrying the message from conference to conference, building up to the CSR Business Olympics in 2005. This major event will celebrate positive business activities and best practice throughout Europe and reward achievements in the field of CSR. Like the Olympic movement, it will be an ongoing event recurring every 4 years.” Now that CSR is therefore big business (and big for

government), is it big for one important sector, whose activities and products have a direct impact of the sustainability of development, namely the UK speculative housebuilding industry?

In this chapter, we suggest that the rapid dissemination of CSR as an embodiment of a new business ethic presents the housebuilding industry with a particular challenge to its corporate identity and relationships. We explore how the raised expectations for more responsible business behaviour, which are now evident in government and among the public at large, make particular demands on a housebuilding industry that has experienced an ever tighter regulatory environment in recent years. We trace the immediate efforts of the largest housebuilders to respond to the CSR agenda and question how far the adoption of corporate strategies and policies at head office is likely to make any local impact in any industry where production is notoriously mobile and decentralised. This leads us to ask important questions about the capacity of the industry to adapt to new agendas in its business and policy environments and specifically about whether the varied response to CSR among different housebuilders might reflect their future potential. Since this chapter is built primarily upon analysis of published company reports supplemented by limited interview work with housebuilders and their representative bodies, our findings are necessarily tentative and require to be tested by more detailed research at a local level. It is therefore appropriate that we conclude by outlining how a research agenda might be constructed to test the commitment of the housebuilding industry to CSR at the local level.

The chapter is presented in five sections. In the next section, we outline how UK housebuilding is structured and organised. We draw particular attention to the highly competitive and indeed turbulent structure of UK housebuilding and to the nomadic and still rudimentary nature of its craft-based production process, both of which make the industry highly focused on the short-term. In the third section, we present an analysis of how the UK's top 10 housebuilders in 2003 had responded to the Government's CSR agenda, recognising of course that the articulation of strategies and policies at the top of any business is meaningless, unless systems are in place to ensure their effective dissemination and implementation throughout the organisation. Our fourth section therefore concentrates on what we perceive to be the main cultural and institutional barriers to the widespread adoption of CSR in the housebuilding industry. To some extent, this section draws on previous work (Adams and Watkins, 2002 and Adams, 2004) but it is also informed our direct discussions with the industry. In our final section, we suggest that the UK housebuilding industry, with few notable exceptions, has yet to fully embrace the principles of CSR in the development of housing. This raises important questions about the adaptive capacity of the industry, which are taken forward in our suggested research agenda.

2. THE STRUCTURE AND ORGANISATION OF UK HOUSEBUILDING

At first glance, the UK housebuilding industry would seem to be well placed to respond to the CSR agenda. Although there are about 18,000 housebuilders registered with the National House Building Council (NHBC), speculative production of new homes in the UK is dominated by a small number of major companies. In 2003, the three main builders (Barratt, Wimpey and Persimmon) completed over 12,000 units each, while a further eight companies built over 2000 each and twelve more over 1,000 each (Wellings, 2004). This pattern reflects the long-term trend towards increased concentration of housebuilding capital, at least in terms of unit output (Nicol and Hooper, 1999). For example, in 1980, there were 24 housebuilders completing more than 500 units who collectively claimed a 39% share of the market, but by 2000, the number of such companies had risen to 43 and their market share to 71%. Despite the existence of numerous small builders operating at a local level, the concentration of capital in housebuilding means relatively few companies would need to be persuaded of the merits of CSR to achieve a disproportionate impact in the sector's practices.

The sustained economic growth and rapid house price inflation of recent years have made the sector highly profitable, reflecting its financial reliance on the fortunes of the housing market and development cycle. As Fraser-Andrews (2004, p. 11) comments, "The housebuilders have been enjoying supernormal returns in the last three years as a result of stock profits with operating margin and return on capital employed not far off levels recorded in the 1980s boom at 18% and 30% respectively in 2003". Of course, past experience of market collapse and company bankruptcy may produce caution about future prospects but with the industry's concentrated structure matched by favourable finances, it might appear that speculative housebuilding would be reasonably well placed to give CSR serious consideration. Nevertheless, more detailed scrutiny of the sector's organisation, processes and culture suggests four main reasons why CSR might find it hard to take root in speculative housebuilding.

Potential barriers to corporate social responsibility in housebuilding

First, owing to the very distinctiveness of its processes and products, the industry operates more at the margins than at the centre of business networks and culture where the CSR debate currently appears most influential. Wellings (2006), who has traced the rise of national housebuilders over the past 75 years or so, argues convincingly that companies do best when they focus solely on housebuilding, not when they are combined with general contractors or merged into industrial conglomerates. The emphasis Wellings places on the entrepreneurial nature of housebuilding and the vital role played by dominant individuals in successful housebuilding companies highlights how the sector is largely managed and directed by those whose business experience is entirely within housebuilding, rather than by those who have honed their management skills across different sectors. Although there is an established pattern of middle management moving among housebuilders as their careers develop, there is very little evidence of generic management expertise at senior level bringing modern business attitudes and cultures into housebuilding from, say, high-street retailing or consumer goods production.

If the sector's leaders could demonstrate exposure to generic management concepts through their education, the industry's relative isolation might be less significant. In this context, however, Wellings' research is particularly revealing. "Although many of the successful housebuilding entrepreneurs use a related trade or professional qualification as a means of entry into the industry, most of these skills are inborn or honed in the real world. Few have been university educated let alone had formal business training" (Wellings, 2005, p. 96). The very practical emphasis of management training in the sector may well make housebuilders at best slow to adopt and at worst hostile to such modern ideas as adaptive capacity, core competencies and indeed corporate social responsibility. Our interview with a representative body of the housebuilding industry revealed the following interesting comment in response to an explanation of the re-definition and broadening of CSR:

"Well I have to say that the definition of corporate social responsibility which you're using here, is not one that I'm familiar with. I mean when the term is used in relation to industry generally we do get involved you know with organisations like Scottish Business in the Community and so forth. It tends to mean something different; it's all about sponsoring the local football team, building a community centre as a gesture to your local community and companies playing their part within the local community. I mean this may be something that we've missed, but I never really heard it considered in this context."

Secondly, the industry's corporate structure, although dominated by major housebuilders, is highly turbulent with an almost constant pattern of merger and takeover (Adams and Watkins, 2002).

Thus, only five of the top housebuilders of the early 1980s retained a top ten position by the end of the decade and only two remained in the top ten by 2001 (Wellings, 2005). Most of those that fell by the wayside during these two decades (including such well-known names as Comben, Ideal and William Leech) succumbed to takeover by competitors. Other companies such as Beazer, which was still a regional operation in the early 1980s, rose rapidly to national prominence to become the third largest UK housebuilder by 2000, only to run into financial difficulties itself and be taken over by its rival, Persimmon, in 2001. Such corporate turbulence remains endemic in housebuilding, with the takeover of David Wilson Homes by Barratt and the merger between Taylor Woodrow and Wimpey, both announced in 2007, merely the latest example of a well-embedded feature of the industry⁴. As a result of this unsettled corporate environment, most successful housebuilders are constantly on the lookout for competitors who they might take over, while those who run into even temporary financial difficulties must battle hard to save the company's independence. This is hardly the best starting point from which to prioritise broader social responsibility or to visualise long-run corporate benefits from more ethical behaviour when the short-run can be so perilous and uncertain.

Thirdly, speculative housebuilding is an inherently transient process in which the dispersed and localised nature of production bestows a certain independence of mind at the local level and limits the extent to which head office can fashion outlooks, uphold standards, or determine behaviour where they matter most. The three basic skills required to establish development feasibility in housebuilding, namely those of controlling ownership through land acquisition, securing planning permission and other public consents, and creating attractive marketing images to entice customers, must be delivered not by head office but at the local level (and indeed at the site level). Apart from those locations or times of poor housing demand, the viability and profitability of speculative residential development has thus depended on finding land at the right price, gaining planning permission and marketing the completed product, the first two of which are essentially localised activities (Adams and Watkins 2002).

Since shortages of available building land, particularly at pressured times and locations, most constrain the housing development process, the industry is inherently 'land-focused' rather than 'customer-focused' or 'community-focused'. As Barker (2004, p.106) commented: "When land is in relatively scarce supply, fewer permissioned sites mean that there will be fewer competing housebuilders in any one area. This can reduce consumer choice. In such situations, competition focuses on land. Once land is secured, competitive pressures are reduced: to a large extent housebuilders can 'sell anything' ". In such a business environment, some housebuilders may be reluctant to engage in CSR if they consider it has nothing extra to contribute to short-term profitability or long-term business health. Of course, as we subsequently indicate, far-reaching changes are underway in the policy environment for housebuilding, as a result of which companies that demonstrate a broader outlook may be better placed to flourish in future. Specifically, while the three basic development skills have been polished and sharpened primarily through the construction of mass, standardised greenfield sites, they now need to be re-fashioned to a brownfield environment, where fresh approaches to land acquisition, planning and marketing are required.

Fourthly, housebuilding is an essentially conservative industry in which strong reliance is placed on tried and tested methods and in which new ideas and concepts are treated with a certain caution. Sir John Egan, who has previously headed the Government's construction task force and its enquiry into the skills needed for the development of sustainable communities commented, when giving evidence to the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee (2005, para 152), that the housebuilders "that have survived have pared themselves down to a relatively comfortable life but that is not the way you stimulate innovation. These are comfortable people doing a

comfortable job.” Interesting, an equally derogatory comment was made by a representative of the industry who we interviewed:

“Housebuilders, if they haven’t told you already, will tell you that they’re all simple men, simple house builders and they’ll abide by whatever is mandatory, anything that is statutory and some of what isn’t statutory, but they do need to be helped”.

This attitude of ‘comfortable survival’ might help explain why, according to Ball (1999, p. 9), “British housebuilding has an exceptionally poor record of innovation in design and production methods”. Barlow (1999, p. 23) too chides the industry as being “notoriously slow to innovate”. Empirical studies of housebuilding practice tend to support such claims. Gibb *et al.* (1995), in their study of Scottish housebuilders, found that the majority questioned could not identify a single technical innovation in the previous five years, while Barlow and Bhatti (1997), undertook a survey of over one hundred firms involved in the UK industry, and found that less than ten per cent were developing new designs or trying out new technologies.

Ball (1999) further suggests that consumer conservatism constrains innovation in terms of both output and input markets. As house purchasers are conservative in their tastes in house styles and worried about future resale values, this reinforces the producers’ tendency towards standardisation and deters builders from introducing innovative or exciting house designs. The conservatism of consumers on design is also reflected in the reluctance of lenders to offer mortgages on non-traditional forms of construction, while the uncertainty introduced by cycles in the housing market persuades builders to organise in ways that maximise flexibility. These include widespread sub-contracting, traditional building techniques and low amounts of fixed capital on building sites. Such structural constraints encourage firms to adopt low cost strategies (apart from land acquisition) that require minimum sophistication and forecasting ability, while discouraging innovation.

According to the European Commission (2001, p.366) corporate social responsibility represents “a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on voluntary basis”. In summary however, despite the dominance of the industry by large companies with the resources actively to engage in corporate social responsibility, we believe that the relative isolation of the sector, its corporate turbulence, the essentially localised nature of its production process and its inherent culture of conservatism are together likely to slow down the widespread diffusion of CSR in housebuilding. Indeed, if CSR is to provide the means by which speculative housebuilding begins to engage more fully with the concept of sustainable development, fundamental changes are likely to be required in the industry’s organisation, processes and culture.

The policy challenge for housebuilders

Two recent Government’s documents in England, the Barker Review and the Sustainable Communities Plan highlight the challenges now facing the industry. Kate Barker’s review of housing supply proposes that an additional 120,000 dwellings per annum should be constructed, almost doubling completions rates in the recent past (Barker, 2004). This is an ambitious target given that housing production is a record low post-war level. Although part of the explanation for the current low levels of production is undoubtedly attributable to the constraints imposed by the planning system, some responsibility must also lie with the strategies of firms and the low production capacity of the industry. For instance, it is clear that builders often control the rate of housing production in order to avoid deflating the prices paid for their product. They can do this

because there is little competition for customers and they retain a monopolistic control of their local markets (Crook et al, 2005).

The Sustainable Communities Plan seeks to enhance housing supply and affordability in the south east of England and to renew markets in parts of the north and midlands (ODPM, 2003). Interestingly, it explicitly places the onus on the housebuilding industry to provide three of the key requirements for a 'sustainable community'. These features are development of sufficient size, scale and density and of the right layout to support basic amenities in the neighbourhood and minimise the use of resources; buildings – both individually and collectively – that can meet different needs over time, and that minimise the use of resources; and a well-integrated mix of decent homes of different types and tenures to support a range of household sizes, ages and incomes.

Both Barker and the Sustainable Communities Plan highlight their expectations of a strategic role for the housebuilding industry in contributing to social and economic welfare, although they are largely unconcerned with environmental issues. In this context, the cross-party House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee (2005, para 156) noted that: "While we are encouraged by the attitude of some house building companies the majority are nowhere near achieving the kind of record with regard to environmental performance we would consider acceptable." The Committee called for housing policy, including the outcomes of Barker and the Sustainable Communities Plan, to be explicitly set against environmental limits and suggested a major role for housebuilders in helping to achieve sustainability targets.

The combined effect of these government documents is to identify the housebuilding industry as the key means of delivering several different (social, economic and environmental) policy objectives that are potentially in conflict. As a consequence, housebuilders now find themselves operating in a complex and dynamic regulatory environment in which they are expected to behave in a far more socially responsible manner than in decades past. Despite the structural and institutional barriers to the potential adoption of CSR identified in this section, there is emerging evidence that some of the UK's largest housebuilders are beginning to develop clear CSR policies and strategies. We therefore review a selection of these in the next section, while identifying some practical difficulties to their implementation in the following section.

3. THE HOUSEBUILDING INDUSTRY'S PUBLIC RESPONSE TO CSR

This section reports our detailed analysis of the CSR reports produced by the top 10 housebuilders in 2003, listed by Wellings (2004) according to unit completions. These were, in alphabetical order: Barratt, Berkeley, Bellway, Miller, Persimmon, Redrow, Taylor Woodrow, Westbury, Wilson Bowden and Wimpey.

The study revealed that all ten companies recognised the relevance of CSR in the land development process, with each having dedicated sections on their websites. However, only seven housebuilders published a specific CSR report. Of the remaining three, Berkeley produced a sustainability report, Miller's website accepted the need for 'corporate and social responsibility' without publishing any additional material, while Westbury acknowledged CSR but published only a broad environmental policy.

To structure our analysis, we developed a list of six key delivery objectives for CSR as a means of testing the top ten housebuilders' stated intentions against the UK Government's published approach to CSR (DTI, 2001, 2002 and 2004). These six objectives are shown in Table 1. Subsequent discussion in this chapter concentrates on the first four of these.

Table 1 Key Delivery Objectives for CSR in the UK Housebuilding Industry	
Delivery Objective	Features
1. Mainstreaming the Implementation of CSR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Environmental Management Strategy ○ Key Performance Indicators ○ Transparency ○ CSR management ○ FTSE4Good ○ Business in the Community
2. Altering the Construction Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Modern Methods of Construction ○ Efficiency ○ Recycling ○ Waste ○ Innovation ○ Procurement
3. Changing the Housing Product	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Affordability ○ Brownfield development ○ EcoHomes ○ SAP ratings ○ Environmental Efficiency
4. Engaging Stakeholders and the Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Effective engagement ○ Customer Relations ○ Understanding ○ Initiatives and donations
5. Modifying Workforce Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Training and development ○ Health and safety
6. Influencing Supplier Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Supply Chain Management ○ Training and development ○ Innovation

Source: Own Analysis

Mainstreaming the Implementation of Corporate Social Responsibility

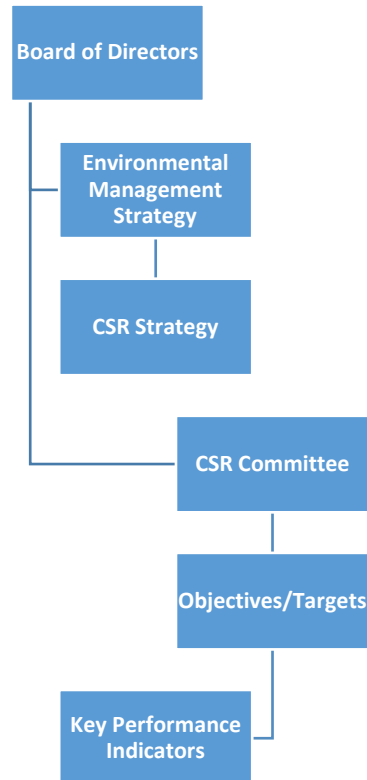
This first objective is concerned with mainstreaming CSR into companies' modus operandi through the implementation of a CSR management system that includes, for example, the publication of key performance indicators. The typical system adopted by the housebuilders is shown in Figure 1.

All ten companies studied had members of the main board sitting on a CSR committee. One company, Berkeley, had named main board director with specific responsibility for sustainability issues. This company's sustainability working group met on a quarterly basis to review policies, progress and implementation issues. The group was made up of senior executives from each of the main divisions and the minutes were presented to the main board.

Effective communication of the CSR management strategy between the main board and each regional division is fundamental to implementation. Berkeley was again the only builder that explicitly demonstrated this. In Berkeley's case, each division was required to set sustainability objectives and to report to the main board quarterly on their progress, including performance against the company's sustainability key performance indicators (KPIs). Each division was also responsible for ensuring that sustainability issues were integrated into their own management

systems (Berkeley Group, 2004). No other housebuilder in the top ten in 2003 required each division to set sustainability or CSR targets and measure performance.

Figure 1: A Typical CSR Management System in Housebuilding



(Source: Own Analysis)

Only half of the top ten housebuilders (Barratt, Berkeley, Persimmon, Taylor Woodrow and Wimpey) had developed KPI's and tabulated progress made. The rest were content to demonstrate their 'potential' performance through objectives and targets for the coming years. Eight out of the ten housebuilders produced such targets for 2005-2006. Wilson Bowden Homes produced objectives the period from 2004-2007 together with yearly targets, reporting progress in an annual CSR report.

Altering the Construction Process

The endeavours of housebuilders to minimise the negative impacts of the construction process by taking necessary measures to recycle and reduce waste, increase resource efficiency and improve procurement processes is central to delivering the second objective. Key performance indicators formed a large part of housebuilders' transparent commitment to product and process responsibility. For the construction process, housebuilders' had developed KPI's in such areas as brownfield utilisation, safety training, number of employees involved in the SAYE scheme, charitable donations, and reductions in the amount of yard skips removed, CO2 emissions and water consumption.

Nine out of the ten housebuilders had a waste minimisation policy. Although the majority wished to increase recycling, the only specific type of recycling for which housebuilders were achieving or setting targets in 2003 involved plasterboard, with five companies able to demonstrate action to recycle this material.

Only five housebuilders appeared to recognise supply chain management as a tool for increasing control over specifications and standards in the construction process. As Table 2 shows, Wilson Bowden, for example, had set up a ‘Supply Chain Environmental Forum’ and developed an ‘Environmental Supply Chain Improvement Plan’, the aim of which was to improve environmental awareness by the improved communication of various sustainable construction targets throughout the supply chain (Wilson Bowden plc, 2004). However, no KPI’s were evident to demonstrate progress made toward the goals in the improvement plan.

Table 2: Wilson Bowden’s ‘Environmental Supply Chain Improvement Plan’
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use green specification • Increase the volume of certified/sustainable timber • Reduce CO2 emissions • Reduce fuel consumption and vehicle emissions • Reduce the use of volatile organic consumption compound emissions • Waste/biodiversity issues • Increase recycling opportunities and volumes • Reduce packaging • Reduce gas and electricity consumption • Use 100% renewable energy • Reduce water consumption • Improve material life cycle • Improve pollution risk management

Source: Wilson Bowden plc (2004)

Only two of the top ten housebuilders claimed to conduct risk appraisals for their development projects prior to the start of construction. Bellway aimed to test all large sites and every urban development over 0.5 ha through an environmental assessment or sustainability audit, while Berkley claimed to conduct a risk appraisal for each project. Redrow had produced a ‘quality control file’ for each property built and conducted a detailed inspection prior to release, while Wimpey had developed a ‘construction code of practice’ whose four objectives were safety, environment, respect and communication (George Wimpey plc, 2004).

Changing the Housing Product

Comparatively little attention was paid to the sustainability of the **house** when compared to that of the production process. As Table 3 shows, only five out of the top ten housebuilders published Standard Assessment Procedure ratings for houses built in 2004, although the majority of met the Government’s 60% brownfield development target. Although key performance indicators were less common for product than process, other relevant examples included EcoHomes ratings and increases in dual flush toilets and customer recommendation.

Table 3: Top Ten Housebuilders' SAP Ratings and Brownfield Completions in 2004		
Housebuilder	Average SAP Rating	% Brownfield completions
Barratt	Undisclosed	80
Bellway	95.6	75
Berkeley	77.6	95
Miller	Undisclosed	65
Persimmon	92	52
Redrow	Undisclosed	70
Taylor Woodrow	87-105	64
Westbury	Undisclosed	Undisclosed
Wilson Bowden	Undisclosed	44 (2003)
Wimpey	94	68

Source: Own Analysis

Very little mention was given in the reports to 'EcoHomes' standards, with only Bellway Homes and Taylor Woodrow aspiring to improve their rating 'on selected developments at their discretion' through performance targets and sustainability objectives. Wilson Bowden, as part of its sustainability objectives for 2003-2007, intended to undertake and achieve EcoHomes good/very good rating for 'appropriate affordable housing projects' only (Wilson Bowden, 2004). Wimpey, having built 1,453 out of 12,232 homes in 2004 to EcoHomes standards, intended to assess the "practical and commercial viability of using the standard more widely" (George Wimpey plc 2004, p. 15). Although, Berkeley did not then employ the EcoHomes assessment on its developments as standard practice, its sustainability targets in 2004/5 targets included a requirement to gather data on the performance of all dwellings using the EcoHomes methodology, with a view to setting performance standards.

Although housebuilders were very communicative in their recognition of the *need* to reduce CO2 emissions, water and energy use, and to build more affordable and environmentally friendly products, little attention was paid to *how they intended* to do this. Wilson Bowden (2004, p. 18), for example, stated that "we continue to embrace the thinking behind Modern Methods of Construction...In designing our properties, we strive to incorporate materials and techniques which...exceed the Building Regulations in order to reduce impact on the environment, (and) improve the quality of our product". However, the company did not explain what MMC it intended to use, or how such methods would reduce environmental impacts.

On a more positive note, Laing Homes (which was subsequently incorporated within Wimpey) received a 'very good' EcoHomes rating for all 525 homes in a planned development on former MoD land in Guildford. The company had incorporated eco-friendly additions such as solar panels, recycling facilities, rainwater butts, and bicycle storage; while 6.8 of the development's 23 hectares has been laid out as public green space, with preserved woodland (George Wimpey plc, 2004). In another example, Redrow, in a joint project with Nottingham University, proposed to construct 'a test house' enabling long term testing and development of building components and systems including: thermal and acoustic insulation methods, hydrogen fuel cell energy, combined heat and power units and wireless technology. Whilst this demonstrated willingness to experiment with MMC, it still remained the meagre exception rather than the rule.

Engaging Stakeholders and the Community

Developing partnerships with stakeholders and communicating more effectively are key principles of CSR. The importance of stakeholder engagement was recognised by most builders. Taylor Woodrow (2004, p. 6) considered stakeholder engagement as a “material CSR issue”, Barratt (2004, p. 25) saw it “...an essential ingredient of our CSR performance”, whilst Wimpey (2004, p. 6) reported that it would “strive to be a responsive company and enter dialogue with our stakeholders on a wide range of business and CSR issues.” Overall, all but one of the top ten housebuilders (Bellway) made mention of the need to engage effectively with stakeholders and saw this as a core responsibility of housebuilding. However, only seven out of the ten came up with a list of key stakeholders in the housebuilding process, and none developed targets or objectives. Barratt (2004) identified typical key stakeholders diagrammatically to include national and local government, non-government organisations, investors, communities, customers, suppliers and contractors, and employees.

An understanding of sustainable communities and wider community needs is another important principle behind delivering the fourth objective in Table 1. Community engagement and involvement appeared to be the most developed aspect of the CSR reports studied, except for Barratt’s. Whether it was sponsoring the Scottish World Champion cyclist Chris Hoy (Miller) or making sure school children were aware of the dangers of building sites (Westbury), for example, housebuilders appeared to have some commitment to supporting local communities financially.

Table 4: Berkeley Group plc: Example of Community Engagement
St Georges Imperial Wharf, London: Mixed-use development of 2 million sq ft including 1,665 houses
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consultation of over 4000 households• Newsletter distribution• Local exhibitions and feedback• Local school/resident consultation on layout of the new park• Onsite information centre - plans & models• Neighbourhood Liaison officer• Regular community newsletter

Source: Berkeley (2004) pp. 14-15.

However, only half of the ten housebuilders investigated (Bellway, Berkeley, Persimmon, Redrow and Wimpey) explicitly connected issues of community involvement to that of sustainability. Table 4 shows how Berkeley tried to achieve this connection in one important London development. The others largely focused on charitable events and sponsorship, and entirely missed the point of creating ‘sustainable communities’.

Summary of CSR reports analysed

Whilst the ambitious commitment made by the top ten housebuilders to corporate social responsibility was clear through the publication of CSR reports, the quality of those reports and the material discussed varied. Each report was structured differently, and in some cases, confusingly. All the companies demonstrated some commitment to mainstreaming CSR in their management

systems, but only Berkeley demonstrated real permeability of this CSR management system at all levels throughout the company.

The housebuilders' approach to the product and the production process was disappointing, with little mention made of the sustainability and efficiency of the house. The perceived importance of stakeholder engagement was evident throughout the CSR reports, although effective engagement seemed limited. Indeed, only a few housebuilders demonstrated commitment to the development of 'sustainable communities', rather focusing on charitable donations and community engagement. In the next section, we therefore try to pinpoint some of the main barriers to the genuine dissemination of CSR in the housebuilding industry.

4. PREVALENT CULTURES AND PRACTICES AS AN IMPEDIMENT TO THE GENUINE DISSEMINATION OF CSR IN HOUSEBUILDING

Despite the structural and organisational constraints to the widespread adoption of CSR in housebuilding, it was apparent that most of the largest companies had at least adopted and published CSR policies or strategies. Those that had not done so explicitly had articulated new operational practices that implicitly pointed to the concept of CSR. Nevertheless, the dispersed and localised nature of production in the sector made it far from inevitable that pronouncements made at the top of companies would have much influence at the bottom, where much of the debate around the sustainability of development takes place. The key research issue is therefore to investigate whether a policy-implementation gap exists in attitudes to CSR across the housebuilding industry and if so, whether it will threaten the delivery of more progressive policies adopted by the boards of the major companies.

Lack of customer care

There is an important connection here with debates about customer care and consumer satisfaction in housebuilding. Several recent surveys have identified high levels of dissatisfaction with the internal quality and layout and external design of new development (CABE, 2004; Leishman and Warren, 2005). According to the Barker Report (2004, p. 112) "Customer satisfaction levels have fallen since 2000, with only 46 per cent of customers saying that they would recommend their housebuilder. The need to improve standards applies right across the industry: of the nine companies that performed worse than the industry average on this indicator, four – Persimmon, Barratt, Wilson Connolly and Westbury – were among the top ten housebuilders in 2002."

Three BBC TV Watchdog Reports in 2004 further highlighted the industry's poor record of customer care. The first programme in February 2004 focused on complaints about the quality of drinking water at a newly-built Persimmon estate. One month later, the programme turned its attention to over 200 e-mails it had received from dissatisfied customers of Westbury Homes. One viewer had commissioned an independent surveyor's report on the quality of a new Westbury home, which found at least 43 different faults. In November 2004, Watchdog reported that it had received over hundred complaints about David Wilson Homes. One buyer who listed 339 separate snagging faults claimed that she could not get the house warm because the walls and ceilings had not been properly insulated and because of gaps behind radiators and around tiles and cracks in the bathroom.

Such individual complaints about the quality of newly completed speculative housing are longstanding and led Barker (2004) to call for a strategy from the House Builders Federation to increase the proportion of housebuyers who would recommend their builder to at least 75% by

2007. Failure to deliver such an improvement should, in Barker's view, lead to the Office of Fair Trading conducting a wide-ranging review of whether the market for new housing works well for consumers. Such controversies suggest that the industry might do well to develop a better sense of responsibility to its own customers before it embarks on the greater challenge of demonstrating its new CSR credentials.

Of course, poor customer satisfaction is never deliberately planned by top management in the industry but just happens and seems to happen with enduring regularity. Indeed, it is likely that shortages of skilled labour, difficulties of subcontracting (which is used extensively in housebuilding) and poor on-site supervision all combine to frustrate the best efforts of the industry to deliver high-quality products of which the producer and consumer might be equally proud. This failure to deliver what is planned and intended by the industry can be thus attributed partly to failures in the design and operation of the relevant systems and partly to ingrained habits, attitudes and cultures at the local level which take poor quality as a normal component of day-to-day experience. Could the same happen to undermine management's best intentions to turn housebuilding into an industry resplendent with CSR awards?

Confrontation with the public sector

If a sense of corporate social responsibility is indeed to pervade all that the housebuilding industry within five or ten years at the most, a fundamental change will be required in its institutional culture at the local level. There has long been evidence, going as far back as the land availability studies of the early 1980s, of the housebuilding industry at a national and to a lesser extent, regional level working constructively with governments across a range of mutual interests, including land release and health and safety. The widespread adoption of CSR throughout the industry will require this sense of partnership to permeate all the way to the lowest levels of operation, so ensuring a practical difference is made in the social, economic and environmental impact of housebuilding at the local level.

Unfortunately, however, relations between housebuilders and local authorities are too often characterised by confrontation and lack of trust, especially over land release. Such lack of co-operation comes to a head in the intense planning battles fought out at public inquiries where inspectors have the difficult task of mediating between the demands of builders for a greater supply of land and those of local action groups who wish to preserve valued open countryside. In one sense, it is possible to agree with Barker that the planning system needs to take greater account of the market pressures upon housebuilders and deliver a greater supply of land for development. In another sense, however, as Barker recognizes, housebuilders themselves need to take a more rounded view of the impact and potential contribution of their development to local communities, if their proposals are ever to prove more generally acceptance.

Unimaginative and repetitive design

One interesting aspect of this debate concerns the form and design of new speculative housing, which has until recently, highlighted the tendency among housebuilders to be unimaginative in method and unsophisticated in outlook. Most builders have devised and use standard house types, which contrast with customised one-off designs for specific sites, since they are reproduced in a repetitive unmodified way in a range of different locations (Nicol and Hooper, 1999). Such frequent standardisation of product derives from the intense pressures within the industry to maintain profitability by cost minimisation and price competition. Standard house types facilitate construction by a low-skilled workforce, enable central purchasing of components and limit designs costs both directly and through blanket building control approval. Moreover, by using

tried and tested products, housebuilders are able to reduce risks by more accurate cost forecasting when they bid for land and by reliance on designs known to have sold well in the past.

Corporate social responsibility, however, might require housebuilders to take a more flexible approach to development and instead tailor products towards the particular regional or local vernacular. Nonetheless, as we saw in section 3, most of the leading housebuilders have yet to take CSR seriously when it comes to their product, although there is evidence that some are beginning to do some in respect of their production processes. Unfortunately, most housebuilders are interested in better design only if it produces higher sales, achieves a higher price, wins planning approval more speedily or contributes to marketing strategies. According to Carmona (1999), this is because house purchasers are primarily driven by cost, value for money, functionality and size of the property, and only then by intrinsic design. In design terms, housebuilders' main incentive is to improve the 'kerb appeal' of their products (Goodchild and Karn, 1997) by attaching mock features to façades in order to give the pretence of individuality, improving internal amenities and facilities, and developing detached and semi-detached houses rather than terraces and flats.

Reluctance to create sustainable communities

In this context, evidence from our interviews highlighted 'the lack of engagement between government and industry' and 'the absence of dialogue'. The ever-increasing role of planning gain in providing for affordable housing and other community benefits came in for particular criticism from one interviewee:

"The only problem we've got is we don't think we should provide it, you know, pay for it. We didn't create the problem, and we're just another industry. Just in the same way you don't ask a bus company to give free tickets to people who can't afford buses, why should the housing industry give free houses or free land to effectively, the country?"

In production terms, the industry might well claim that it is already among the most regulated in the UK. Alongside the recent emphasis on brownfield rather than greenfield housing and the higher design standards now required by many local authorities, the industry faced much stronger energy efficiency requirements as a result of changes in the Building Regulations in 2002 (Adams, 2004). Where an industry already perceives itself to be highly regulated, it requires a particularly imaginative outlook to see the point of going beyond the basic requirements of the current regulatory regime and voluntarily offering society extra benefits which may have no immediate financial return. Our interview with an industry representative, while recognising that:

"house building tends to be sensitive politically - very sensitive politically at local level and that translates into national level" concluded that "We don't see it necessarily as our responsibility to follow government policy. Why would we? That's quite fundamental."

On the other hand, it was apparent from the senior representative of a regional housebuilder that the industry needs to move beyond its past focus on the house plot or even the housing estate and engage with the new discourse of sustainable communities, if it is ever to break out from the its confrontations with, and distrust of, locally-elected politicians. What was fascinating from this discussion was that our interviewee revealed that he has previously advised the company chairman to alter the focus as well as the language of his public pronouncements. Specifically, he had suggested to the chairman that

“To be successful, to open doors, will you stop talking about money, please start talking about things that are valuable to people, and that subject could be energy efficiency, it could be jobs, it could be education, it could be how we support the hospital, for instance”

Examples of good practice: how housebuilding cultures can change

This sort of progressive attitude does appear to be on the rise, especially among housebuilders outside the top ten. There are some interesting cases where firms have aligned themselves with public policy objectives, including affordability, environmental and neighbourhood renewal goals, as part of a revised corporate strategy. Crest Nicholson (the 13th largest UK housebuilder in 2004) for instance, has explicitly sought to become associated with the delivery of affordable homes and ‘ethical’ housebuilding, while the Berkeley (which entered the ‘top ten’ only in 2000) has established a subsidiary, Berkeley Community Villages, that is specifically concerned with the creation of sustainable communities planned to the highest design standards. There are many examples of this sort of niche marketing and the evidence suggests that the strategy has been successful in commercial terms. In early 2005, for example, Crest Nicholson reported a 130% increase in the production of affordable homes and estimated that the urban renewal market was worth more than £30 million (Macalister, 2005). Such examples provide support for the DTI’s contention that CSR practices can contribute to competitiveness and that “CSR should be good for long term business success” (DTI, 2004, p. 3).

These activities have also delivered wider social and environmental benefits. There are many prominent contributions to the regeneration agenda including Crosby Homes’ (a part of the Berkeley Group) redevelopment of Clarence Docks in Leeds, Bellway’s work on the new residential quarter in Littlehampton and Urban Splash’s high profile neighbourhood renewal scheme at New Islington/Cardroom in Manchester. In addition, in the sustainable development arena, Countryside Properties (the 16th largest UK housebuilder in 2004), have performed commendably in delivering on their commitment to environmentally sensitive development (see House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, 2005). Nevertheless, such strategic responses remain the exceptions. As we suggest earlier, the high level of conservatism that pervades the industry continues to act as a significant constraint on the extent to which CSR activities are genuinely embraced.

5. CONCLUSION

To summarise our arguments in this chapter, we suggest that the slow participation of the speculative housebuilding industry in the notion of corporate social responsibility can be traced to the distinctive characteristics of housebuilding and in particular to its long-established organisation, processes and network. The industry remains relatively isolated from mainstream business practices and network, is highly turbulent in its corporate structure, is not particularly well focussed on customers let alone communities and does not have a strong record of openness to new ideas and concepts.

Nevertheless, it is clear that, at a national level at least, most of the major housebuilders are beginning to take CSR seriously and many have adopted policies or strategies that indicate the desire to take a much broader view of their business activities in future than they may have done in the past. This view is consistent with two surveys of top housebuilders commissioned by the WWF in 2003 and 2004, as part of its ‘One Million Sustainable Homes’ campaign. When compared, the evidence in the two reports (WWF, 2004 and 2005) pointed to a significant improvement in the way housebuilders addressed strategy and risk management and assessed their environmental and social impacts. Interestingly, as the second report commented “On the whole,

the companies now demonstrate a better understanding of the relevance of sustainability issues to their business. This appears to be driven by two important factors: first, at a corporate level, the increased emphasis on non-financial risks and opportunities, and secondly, at a project level, through increasingly demanding planning requirements” (WWF, 2005, p. v).

Of course, the real test of any commitments made at corporate level will lie in their impact or otherwise at the local level. This will mark out those companies that are truly prepared to engage in community building rather than mere estate construction and, in the more regulated environment in which housebuilders now do business, may well suggest to investors which companies have greatest potential for asset growth in the future. It can thus be argued that the inherent business logic that many consider responsible for the rapid growth of corporate social responsibility as a whole applies equally to housebuilding and that the next decade is likely to see a transformation of the structure and organisation of the industry as it moves closer to the construction sector in particular and to encompass modern management strategy in general.

Adams (2004) draws an important distinction between those housebuilders whose behaviour suggests they are over-reliant on the technologies and practices of the past and those prepared to take the risk and invest in what they consider to be the necessary competencies of the future. Unless there is an unexpected and significant policy shift, recognition and engagement with the concept of corporate social responsibility is likely to be an important key determinant of the success of housebuilders in the coming decade. The key difference will be between those who merely espouse CSR strategies and policies on their websites and those who take trouble to permeate the whole of their organisations with the concept of CSR.

This is no mere academic test but is likely to reach to the heart of future business success in housebuilding. Since CSR is part of a wider corporate responsibility agenda that challenges in-bred thinking and behaviour in the speculative housebuilding industry, it will require a revolutionary change in approach if it is to be ‘mainstreamed’ into all that the industry does. Yet, in a sector whose activities are so dependent on the prevailing regulatory environment, companies who fail to take CSR and indeed the whole sustainability agenda seriously are likely to find themselves at a long-term disadvantage when it comes to securing land and obtaining the necessary approvals for development. CSR is therefore another example of the pressing need upon housebuilders to adapt if they wish to survive. Although most of our analysis in this chapter has concentrated on the top ten housebuilders in 2003, there are signs that those companies immediately below the top ten may be more dynamic and have greater adaptive capacity when it comes to mainstreaming the implementation of CSR. If this proves to be the case, it may contribute further to the sector’s turbulence, with more innovative companies gaining from their investment in CSR competencies to outwit some of the more conservative but currently larger builders.

Of course, such a theory can be tested only by detailed empirical work to discover whether, for all their published CSR reports and strategies, any substantial change is taking place in thinking and behaviour where it matters most within the largest housebuilders: at the point of local production. We therefore end this chapter by calling for more thorough research on the local implementation of CSR policies by major housebuilders. Specifically, we would identify three research questions that might usefully be addressed:

1. What training programmes, if any, have those housebuilders with CSR strategies and policies instituted to ensure that they permeate the whole of the organisation?
2. To what extent does CSR form an important consideration at the time of land purchase, both in evaluating alternative sites and in considering the financial offer to be made

3. How far do those employed locally by the housebuilding industry consider they have responsibilities to the sustainability of the communities in which they work as well and to the management and shareholders of the companies by which they are employed?

In conclusion, it is around the answers to such questions at the local level that the real commitment of the major housebuilders to corporate social responsibility will be tested.

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ENDNOTES

¹ <http://www.business-ethics.com/>

² <http://www.csrforum.com/>

³ <http://www.csrcampaign.org/>

⁴ It is as yet too early to know whether the emergence of ‘super-builders’ as represented by the new ‘Taylor Wimpey’ will create a stronger platform upon which to embed corporate social responsibility within business culture or whether CSR will suffer from corporate cost-cutting within such merged companies