

Sustainability in the Real World

If sustainability was really taken seriously, then why are we on course to run out of landfill space in this country in less than a decade? EnviroVent's managing director Nick Heaton discusses this issue in relation to domestic ventilation products and warns of spurious "made in the UK" claims.

You can't avoid picking up a trade paper or magazine these days without reading about a different company claiming they are all of a sudden "UK manufacturers", "green", "sustainable", "low carbon" etc. The term Emperor's new clothes spring to mind.

Without any real investment in any new technologies it is relatively simple and easy to change the appearance of a fan or other product and employ clever marketing strategies to put on some "greenwash". It appears that many companies are jumping on the environmental band wagon in an attempt to seduce customers and make profits with nothing but short term products. If specifiers and contractors fail to see through this it will continue to cost our environment dearly.

Plastic is very sustainable, once made it becomes non biodegradable and will last for hundreds of years. Most plastics come from oil which is one of the natural resources produced by our planet. So why would we throw plastic onto a landfill tip when it can be used and reused for hundreds of years? Why do we make fans and other plastic products from Virgin plastic when we can use and reuse plastic over and over again?

By choosing short term, high maintenance products our landfill sites will continue to be clogged up full with obsolete plastic ventilation products and other waste plastics by the end of the next decade. UK landfill is overflowing with alleged "low carbon" and "sustainable" products that are supposed to be good for the environment!

Many companies supplying products into the UK are missing a big point, and here is why.

How do you define sustainable?

According to the **Oxford English Dictionary** this is what **sustainable** means:

To keep up or keep going; Endure; To keep in existence; Maintain; Capable of being sustained; Capable of being continued with minimal long-term effect on the environment or depletion of natural resources; to continue to exist; last: To continue in the same state without perishing; to last; to remain

This is the opposite of sustainable:

Intolerable; unbearable, unendurable, prevent activity from going on; abandon; discontinue; terminate; kill; stop, surcease, terminate, end; finish, give up; halt; to quit

So the next time a company claims that it is making "sustainable" and "low carbon" products ask them, do they meet the description of sustainable in the Oxford English Dictionary, or are they describing the opposite?

Five points to consider:

Point 1: Carbon Footprint

If products are manufactured in the Far East the carbon footprint is huge. Merchant shipping alone from places like the Far East accounts for over one billion tonnes of CO₂ per year (twice the aviation industry) causing significant worldwide pollution and 60,000 deaths every year.

Point 2: UK Manufacturing

Most motors are made in China. Sleeved bearings are manufactured for five pence which go into motors that cost as little as 30pence. These cheap motors are then imported into the UK in their millions to go into many different types of ventilation products which are expected to provide indoor air quality in our homes and offices. No wonder our homes are making us ill. So don't be seduced by companies claiming they are UK manufacturers that are "sustainable" with low carbon footprints. A UK manufacturer of sustainable products does what it says on the tin, it manufactures everything; it invests in new technologies and keeps pushing the boundaries in its industry to drive innovation, energy efficiency and sustainability. It uses recycled plastics at every opportunity. Importing products from the Far East and assembling them in the UK with virgin plastic doesn't make a UK manufacturer, the carbon footprint for this type of company is as high as an importer from the Far East and the impact on our landfill is huge.

Point 3: Life cycle

How long should a product last? OK, so it may have a low energy motor but if it's only going to last five years and then end up clogging our fast disappearing landfill sites, forget it, it is not sustainable. Would you buy a high efficiency condensing boiler for your home but expect to throw it away after five years or whenever it breaks down? Of course not, there would be parts available for the product for the lifetime of the dwelling. But for some reason we accept cheaply made short term electrical products which become obsolete just because they are allegedly "low energy" or "low carbon".

Point 4: Installation

Another major factor when considering sustainability is the installation. To make matters worse, many short life products are poorly installed with no guidance or support from the alleged "British sustainable manufacturer". This box shifting mentality shortens the life of the product even further, making the journey to landfill even quicker.

Point 5: Our Health

According to a recent study by the American College of Allergists – “50% of the world’s illnesses are caused by poor indoor air quality”. Also, one in five properties in the UK still suffers from condensation and mould. Why do we still have such alarming statistics? Because many companies are seducing specifiers into believing their products will work long term, regardless of design, manufacture or installation. The disappointing fact is – they don’t!

So if you are involved in designing, specifying or installing energy efficient and sustainable products in UK buildings please take a moment to consider the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of sustainability.

Final Considerations

Please consider products from true UK manufacturers that make everything and try to source everything locally, from the bearings to the windings upwards. UK companies that will wherever possible and at every opportunity use recycled plastics in their products. And finally please give your support to the UK companies that strive to make products that last for life. By supporting UK manufacturers that share these values you will truly be doing your bit for “sustainability in the real world” not to mention giving a great deal of help to our local economy which would be most welcome.

*If you would like to comment on this topic, visit the **EnviroVent** blog, the voice of the UK domestic ventilation industry to have your say@ www.envirovent.com*