

# Royal Institute of British Architects

## Response to the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee:

### Net zero and trade

April 2024

The Royal Institute of British Architects is a global professional membership body driving excellence in architecture. We serve our members and society in order to deliver better buildings and places, stronger communities and a sustainable environment. Being inclusive, ethical, environmentally aware and collaborative underpins all that we do.

The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) welcomes the opportunity to respond to this inquiry. British architecture is a global success story – with RIBA Chartered Practices generating around £750 million last year from overseas work. This reflects the architecture professions’ global reach and ability to adapt to different places and people around the world.

Around 40% of global carbon emissions stem from buildings and architects have a significant role to play in reducing UK greenhouse gas emissions. The climate emergency demands urgent action and leadership the Government, the built environment sector, and the wider construction industry.

However, recent changes to the immigration system risk jeopardising the growth of the UK’s world-renowned and thriving architecture profession, which is also integral to delivering net zero both in the UK and abroad.

RIBA recommends that the Government:

- Promotes the UK as a global leader in sustainable design.
- Ensures trade policy accelerates the deployment and take-up of sustainable practices.
- Delivers a Mutual Recognition Agreement (MRA) with the European Union.
- Guarantees that UK practices can continue to benefit from international talent and skills.

## **How can trade help in the pursuit of net zero?**

Architects and the wider built environment sector have a significant role to play in a successful transition to net zero.

The UK is a world leader in sustainable design. At RIBA, we are helping our members to work towards net zero by encouraging them to reach our 2030 Climate Challenge targets.<sup>1</sup> The Challenge calls on RIBA Chartered Practices to reduce whole life carbon by setting targets for operational energy, embodied carbon, and water usage.

RIBA is a founding member of the steering group for the UK Net Zero Carbon Buildings Standard.<sup>2</sup> The Standard focuses on whole life carbon and aims to bring clarity on the UK industry on what is required at the asset level to be in line with climate science. It is intended for anyone who wants to fund, procure, design, or specify a net zero carbon building. It will also support anybody interested in demonstrating that their building is net zero-aligned with an industry-agreed Standard.

RIBA practices are committed to addressing the climate emergency. Our own research showed that in 2021, 54% agreed that sustainability was “at the core of everything” that their organisation did and almost half (48%) said that their business would become obsolete “if [they] did not design sustainable buildings”.<sup>3</sup>

By combining the UK’s strength in sustainable design and its success in exporting, the Government can help to bolster the profession’s efforts to decarbonise on a global scale. For example, the UK Net Zero Carbon Buildings Standard is a model that could be used by other countries - a potential export opportunity.

The UK’s unique global influence on the built environment offers a unique opportunity to support the delivery of sustainable design. Many UK practices have extensive expertise in this area and can support clients to go further and faster towards net zero and limit their local and global climate impacts. British architecture exports are truly international, with high quality buildings designed by UK practices on every continent of the planet.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Global knowledge sharing on climate issues***

To tackle climate change and rapid urbanisation, we committed to the Commonwealth Association of Architects’ (CAA) landmark Memorandum of Understanding.<sup>5</sup> Its purpose is to facilitate a dynamic exchange between the signatory organisations. A number of whom are already responding to the direct impacts of climate change that others will likely face in the years and decades to come.

Through the CAA, we are able to foster deeper global partnerships, share knowledge and expertise, and learn from other countries as we adapt to the realities of a warmer planet. The risks posed by climate change are borderless, and by working together we can collaborate to limit vulnerabilities through shared best practice across urban planning and sustainable design. It is an example of how collaboration and exports can help both the UK and countries around the world reach net zero.

## **How can the UK’s trade policy further help with its goals for net zero?**

The UK’s built environment sector is a force for good. With the right support, we can embed positive change across different global territories through the export of sustainable design services. Trade policy should encourage international action, which accelerates the deployment and take-up of sustainable practices.

The Government must recognise the fruitful opportunities available when the UK's architectural sector is supported to grow and offer its services internationally. Prior to Brexit, architecture directly contributed approximately £4.8 billion to the UK economy each year, with a further £1 billion contribution embedded in the exports of the other industries it supports – from banking to museums, transport to IT systems.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Deliver a Mutual Recognition Agreement (MRA) with the European Union***

For architecture the most significant non-tariff barrier to trade is a lack of mutual recognition of professional qualifications and is a top priority for boosting trade in architecture. It is positive that a number of MRAs have now been signed – one with the US and another trilateral MRA with Australia and New Zealand.

Historically, UK architects have had to go through a costly and bureaucratic process of registration, and sometimes requalification, locally in order to practice or use the title 'architect.' These new MRAs make it easier for UK architects to work in these countries, and vice versa. However, work to secure an MRA with the European Union (EU) is ongoing. An MRA with the EU should be agreed and implemented as soon as possible.

### ***Ensure UK practices can continue to benefit from international talent and skills***

In the architecture sector, the lack of different routes to registration and length of time it takes to train new domestic talent means that the skills pipeline doesn't necessarily reflect current demand for architects. In fact, 86% of our members think that access to international talent is critical to the sector.<sup>7</sup>

Over the last decade, to help encourage more architects to enter the profession, RIBA has been actively championing initiatives to encourage new models for architectural education. The transformation and modernisation of architectural education that RIBA is spearheading including more flexible, accessible, and inclusive study routes with a focus on competence and sustainability, will help us attract the best talent to the profession and support a more representative profession.

However, these measures to improve the diversity and quantity of the UK architectural pipeline will take time to bear fruit. Though we have roughly doubled the number of schools of architecture in the UK in the past twenty years, we still do not have enough junior and mid-career architects within the profession.

It is vital that the immigration system is fit for purpose to allow talented or skilled architects and architectural students to come to the UK. Recent changes to the UK immigration system pose a barrier to architectural practices being able to recruit the international talent they need to thrive and export their services including in sustainable design.

An inability to hire the right skills and talent could limit practices' ability to grow and expand their reach internationally. The ability to hire people who can support the delivery of sustainable design projects in every corner of the globe is critical to the profession's ability to expand and decarbonise buildings simultaneously. The UK architecture sector hugely benefits from its ability to trade in goods and services, and recruit international talent.

An employer may seek to recruit an international architect for several reasons including a scarcity of applicants with specialities or the requirement for soft skills, such as fluency in a particular language, and international market knowledge. Architects that come to the UK may return to their home

country and open a branch of a UK practice. We have heard examples of this happening. The UK immigration system must allow architects to come to the UK to ensure the architectural profession can thrive and grow exports in the future, including in sustainable design.

Recent changes to the immigration system and potential changes to the Graduate Visa route pose a risk to many UK schools of architecture, particularly with regards to admission rates. Our universities are world renowned with a reputation for excellence and innovation. If international students are unable to access the workforce after the successful completion of their studies, it is likely to limit the number of students interested in coming to the UK to study. If we wish to maintain our global influence as a leader and champion of sustainable design, it is counterintuitive to create barriers to the UK's highly skilled architectural profession, which is already in shortage and has a long pipeline due to length of time it takes to qualify.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.architecture.com/about/policy/climate-action/2030-climate-challenge>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nzcbuildings.co.uk>

<sup>3</sup> <https://riba-prd-assets.azureedge.net/-/media/GatherContent/Business-Benchmarking/Additional-Documents/2021-A-Decade-of-Action-RIBA-Members-and-the-SDGspdf.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://riba-prd-assets.azureedge.net/-/media/GatherContent/Core-CPD/AdditionalDocuments/RIBAGlobalTalentGlobalReachReportpdf.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.architecture.com/knowledge-and-resources/knowledge-landing-page/landmark-commonwealth-pact-to-counter-climate-impact-as-urban-populations-set-to-double>

<sup>6</sup> <https://riba-prd-assets.azureedge.net/-/media/GatherContent/Paywalled-resource-with-many-PDFs-VPC/Additional-Documents/DesignMattersWorldClassBuildingsbyUKArchitectspdf.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://riba-prd-assets.azureedge.net/-/media/GatherContent/Powered-by-people/Additional-Documents/RIBApoweredbypeoplefinalversionpdf.pdf>