

Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to the Finishes and Interiors Sector Contractors Awards an occasion to recognise the people and businesses that, as Giles Brandreth coined last year, put the wow into buildings.

That wow is more impressive when we consider the challenges of working in the 2020's. Before we get to the Awards Philip has asked me to give you a brief intro into how FIS are stepping up to help meet these challenges and to remind you that we are here to help.

The Building Safety Act heralds, without doubt, the biggest overhaul of construction regulations in our lifetimes. It isn't just about Higher Risk Residential Buildings - from shed to shard, leader to labourer, it is an overhaul of the Building Regulation and Control Process for all building works. It is a hugely positive intervention in many ways, but like all change, the transition will be difficult. The FIS is here to help.

FIS have been leading from the front responding to consultations, getting stuck into various pan-industry and government groups and working hard to understand the full extent of change and keep our members abreast. There remain a lot of unknowns and we are expecting a raft of secondary regulation and consultation to hit us in June ready for the first big implementation deadline of October.

The new Regulation will necessitate a different approach, led by greater granularity and aligning Building Safety closely to the principles in CDM. We now need to think beyond individual products and packages to a more systemic, co-ordinated approach. To this end Joe Cilia and his team have established a new working group to look at interfaces, penetrations, and complex details within the interior supersystem. It is important that we continue to challenge information and seek consistency of interpretation – both to help us moving forwards, but also to ensure that any legacy issues that arise are dealt with pragmatically.

This work is complementing a wider technical programme that has seen us publish a raft of detailed technical guides and notes designed to improve safety, support training, helping ensure our members are working in a competent, compliant way and avoiding costly repetition of mistakes.

To underpin this work FIS is conducting an extensive Technical Research Programme linked to issues identified through our working groups and coming in via our technical advisory service. In the past year we published crowd-funded research with Southampton University on the impact of movement in tall buildings on interior systems. Also in this arena last week we were with Imperial College and the Steel Construction Institute testing the impact of building movement on SFS fixings. We are in the process of commissioning research with the University of Salford, Sandy Brown and Cundall looking at acoustic performance of pod meeting rooms and we have helped to establish a Government funded project with the University of Hertfordshire looking at Artificial Intelligence to support identifying materials for re-use.

With this approach our knowledge and influence grow and it should be no surprise that FIS was invited to co-chair the new Passive Fire Knowledge Forum, a group of main contractors and trade bodies looking to interrogate emerging safety risks and ensure they are dealt with consistently and pragmatically. The FIS Technical Team is Here To Help and they are helping.

Our Skills Team too have been active, with a huge body of work supporting a number of the official working groups established by the Government's Competency Steering Group. These have been focussed on defining, measuring and proving competence. To move this from theory to practice we launched this year the FIS Guide to Developing a Competency Management Plan and supporting Toolkit. Competency is (alongside information management) the central pillar of the new compliance landscape, not just in the trades, but through

the workforce. The feedback on this practical guide from those trying to implement has been positive.

To attack the skills shortage, it is again important that we leave no stone unturned. FIS was instrumental in getting changes to the Shortage Occupation List and Skilled Worker List announced with the Budget in March. In this announcement it was a great moment to finally see Dry Liners rightly re-categorised on the Skilled Worker List..... the only occupation across the entire economy to be afforded this upgrade.

There is more to be done to respond to Philip's recruitment challenge and ensure when young people see our sector they see a positive choice. To support this we have developed and are constantly reviewing a robust set of qualifications and built a strong network of Approved Training Providers. This month we will be launching a new Apprenticeship Knowledge Programme, initially for Dry Lining. This is a learning resource that will support consistent delivery of the knowledge elements of both the apprenticeship and in support of those working towards assessment for a vocational qualification. As we move into the new era of competence, the sector must have a more consistent approach to instilling knowledge in anyone joining our workforce and this is a vital step forward for competency.

We also have a growing army of STEM Construction Ambassadors that will be going into schools to promote careers in our sector. Recruitment is now the top priority for our new Head of Skills Beena Nana, who brings a fresh approach and wealth of experience to our team. The FIS Skills Team is here to help and they are helping.

Delivering change requires investment in process and people, but we are also aware this is not always rewarded as it should be in a construction sector all too often driven by lowest price. The new compliance landscape is designed to change the culture and modernise the sector, but Modern Methods of Construction need

Modern Methods of Procurement. Talk of transformation is great, but if anything in recent times we have seen more risk dumping ...with architects retreating left on plan of works and onerous design clauses hidden in heavily amended contracts. At the same time, we have seen a credit crunch hit construction and payment times lengthen. Only last week we saw two more main contractors enter administration taking our money locked up in retention and projects with them. Not the transformation that was talked about post pandemic.

This is why we commissioned, with the University of Reading, a wholesale review of Procurement and Contracting practices in our sector. The report was published in the first quarter of 2023. It doesn't make easy reading, it talks of a sector squeezed by the accumulated failures of others, regressive procurement failing to recognise good practices and provides detailed evidence on failure to release retention and withhold payment.

Whilst it isn't good bedtime reading, it does start to give us the evidence required to spotlight the unacceptable and drive change. Data from this report has already featured in a Times article raising concerns around Payment Practices in Construction and helped us to formulate a robust response to Governments consultations on procurement, fair payment and retentions that are ongoing in 2023. As we approach the next election, we will be using the well evidenced and compelling recommendations, urging Government to revisit the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996 (aka the Construction Act), look again at project bank accounts, how we capitalise construction with deposit and ensure SME sub-contractors are resourced to succeed, not abused and used as The United Free Bank of Subcontractor.

Procurement needs to change, the conversation needs to move on, the FIS is here to help and we are helping.

Philip mentioned the growing climate concern. Supported by our Sustainability Champion, Flavie Lowres, we have been addressing the net zero challenge with new advice, training and a number of initiatives focussed on reduced waste, circularity and re-use. Again, our work here has been recognised with FIS invited to join the Skills for a Sustainable Skyline Task force established by the City of London Co-operation an arena that gives us new access to developers, specifiers and policy makers and that will help to ensure your voice is heard.

As I stand here, I am aware that this is a lot, it is tough out there and that you are all very busy people who don't always have time to read all that we send out, regardless of how relevant. Our New Head of Membership Michelle Armstrong is working closely with Jane Knight and her Operations team to improve communications, account management and optimise the balance of Regional Events, Conferences and Working Group meetings. Highlights of our Events programme over the past year have been the new Training Awards in collaboration with the Worshipful Company, the Workspace Design Show, our new Innovation Awards and our interactive Fit-out Industry Day in London. The strength of the FIS network is evidenced in the stellar cast of speakers we have been able to call upon for these events.

Michelle is also focussed on improving our Membership offering and has been instrumental in implementing new services such as our dedicated QS helpline to compliment our legal helpline and our new set of Standard Construction Contracts, which we hope will add a bit of rigour to contract negotiations across the sector. Our vetting process too is being overhauled by Jim Parlour, our Technical and Vetting Manager to ensure that Members and those joining our growing community share our values and uphold the focus on quality on which we are founded.

FIS is a community and we exist only to support this amazing sector. Ultimately we are just here to help.

We have a number of FIS team and Directors in the room, I would ask you all to stand so you can make yourself known. These are the people driving your organisation forward, please tell them, tell me what more you need and we will do all we can to support – your problems are quite literally our problems – as an FIS Member you are never alone – we are here to help.

A couple of housekeeping things before I sit down, I'd like to thank our headline sponsors Ecophon and all our amazing category and dinner sponsors, without whom we would be celebrating these awards gathered around a bunch of polaroid's in Greggs.

I'd also like to wish all entrants the very best of luck– you have done us all proud.

And finally before I sit down, I have the pleasure to have the opportunity to recognise one of the stalwarts of our industry with our second special award of the afternoon.

I think all of you here will know or know of Dave Bonner, Managing Director of Nevill Long, who at the end of March embarked on his well-earned retirement following a career spanning 46 years! Dave is Mr Nevill Long, having joined the company in 1977 and going on to spend his entire career (23 years as Managing Director) helping to steer the business from a merchant with two branches to the nationwide distribution business it is today.

Dave is an industry man through and through and you can see that in the messages that poured in on his retirement - legend, end of an era, visionary, friend. His unwavering and passionate support of both customers, the wider sector, and this organisation, has undoubtedly help shape the industry for the better, and we are all in his debt.

Dave, please can I invite you to the stage so we can say thanks and honour you with a well-deserved lifetime achievement award. Ladies and Gentlemen, raise the roof for Dave Bonner!

Right, grubs up - have a great afternoon all.

Congratulations to the winners and again all who made the shortlist, thanks to the judges, Tony Pieri, Colin Hunter, and Robert Fry. Thanks to our headline sponsor Ecophon, our Award sponsors Minster, SIG, CCF, British Gypsum, Zentia, Nevill Long, Protektor and Euroform. And also our event sponsors Forza Doors, EPD Insulation Group, Fire DNA, Muffle, SPIT, Go Interiors and QIC Trims.

You are all encourage to join us at the Cash bar at the back or slowly make your way to the Swan pub just up the road where we have a space reserved. Thanks all for coming, your ongoing support and have a great evening.