

Getting ready for change: a new focus for BlueBox *partners*

For all of us working in the residential sector, the recession has changed everything. Stable sources of income have been swept away and practitioners the length and breadth of Britain have been forced to diversify to survive. As the dust settles after the election, different approaches to political and economic management are likely to change our landscape again.

After several weeks of consultation and reflection, we have refocused our own activities. After our four year bumpy ride through the dramatic growth and collapse of the Home Condition Report; the rise and partial fall of the Domestic Energy Assessor, and the Commercial EPC initiative that made a damp squib look dynamic; we want to broaden our activities. In this issue of our continuing newsletter, we will outline the main features of the new, improved BlueBox *partners*.

There are four elements to our new structure:

- Training and development;
- Forensic investigation and expert witness;
- Surveyor's toolkit, and;
- Diagnosis of building defects.

The two biggest changes are with training and development and the 'Diagnosis of building defects' which is the new addition to our services. These elements are described in more detail below.

Training and development

We have refocused our training and development activities to provide two services:

Conferences, workshops and seminars to corporate clients and organised groups of practitioners. We are able to deliver all of our titles at your own event. This is not restricted to the established 'corporates' as we are working with a growing number of small practices and informal networks of practitioners. If you provide

What's in this issue?

Welcome to our first newsletter of the government!

This newsletter includes:

- The 'new look' BlueBox *partners*;
- Using the social media to promote your business;
- New asbestos guide from the HSE

If you have any comments on this newsletter or would like to make a contribution, please contact the Blue-Box *partners* office on 0845 260 3500.

a meeting space and look after the catering we can help you deliver cost effective training in your locality. For example, we designed and delivered a one day workshop for a practice in the North East. The event was held in their own boardroom for 15 of their own in-house staff and invited (but paying) consultants. A group of small practices and sole practitioners in the Lake District regularly cooperate on training events and because we charge a fixed daily rate; the delegate cost is considerably less than formally arranged events at regional centres.



In our view, the future of training and development will be based on similar bespoke and interactive partnerships between practitioners and training providers in preference to the sometimes bland, fixed menu with few choices that is currently served.

Distance learning initiatives for individual practitioners. Practitioners have not embraced on-line learning. Several ambitious initiatives (including our own) have not lived up to expectations. In our opinion, this is because most people still prefer the interaction and networking opportunities offered by face-to-face events. However, 'distance learning' material does provide a choice for those who need a flexible and cost effective approach to their professional development. Consequently we have retained (and will extend) our popular Distance Learning Modules and HomeBuyer Report and Building Survey Assessment Service.

Diagnosis of building defects

Although our training and development services cover the whole range of residential issues, there has always been a focus on building pathology. This expertise is based on a diagnostic service for property owners coordinated by Phil Parnham. We are now extending this to cover the whole of England and Wales, targeting individual owners as well as Landlords (both social and private), managing agents as well as commercial property owners. We use the latest research and techniques to accurately identify the cause of all types of building defects found in residential buildings.

We specialise in 'difficult to solve' problems and those defects that threaten to embroil participants in costly legal disputes. We are problem solvers who adopt an objective, diagnostic approach to our work and we have a particular interest in dampness in all its forms.



On our revised website, we describe three types of service:

Level one service - This is based on a visual survey that is 'non-invasive'. We do not lift carpets and floorboards, or look into concealed spaces, or use specialised testing techniques. In most cases we can identify the cause of the problem. However, because many parts of the property remain concealed, further investigations may occasionally be required.

Level two service - This is a more detailed investigation that uses 'invasive' techniques. For example, we may have to lift carpets and floorboards, take off skirting boards and in some cases, knock holes in parts of the property. Some of this work we can do ourselves but occasionally we will use a builder. Although this is more expensive than a level one report, and may disturb part of the dwelling, it will usually identify the precise cause of the defect so cost effective repair work can be organised.

Level three - This level of service is usually associated with formal legal disputes. It will be very thorough and often use specialised testing techniques.

Getting the work done

Identifying the cause of a building defect is just the first step; finding a contractor to carry out the work to a satisfactory standard is the next. BlueBox *partners* offer a variety of additional services that can help to reduce the stress of getting the repairs done including:

- *Providing a detailed specification of the work and materials that are required;*
- *Obtaining fixed quotations from a range of appropriate contractors;*
- *Advising on what sort of contract to use, and;*
- *Inspecting the work to make sure it is done in accordance with the original contract.*

Please contact our office for details of our fees.

Geographical coverage

BlueBox *partners* offer a nationwide diagnostic service from our offices Bristol, Stafford, Kings Lynn and Sheffield. Helping you to get the work done is currently limited to the South Yorkshire region.

Forensic investigations and expert witness

The surveying business of the future needs to show financial stability, exceptional integrity and competence. Currently there is limited scope for practitioners to demonstrate their competencies to clients or insurers, which could be a key measure in the future to get business and maintain sensible rates of professional indemnity insurance.

BlueBox *partners* is now able to assist practitioners, insurers, and corporate clients to identify those competencies that will inspire confidence and give comfort for a sustainable future. We do this through a series of forensic measures which include:

- *Profiling the professional practice and the individual practitioners;*
- *Comparing outputs with other practices and benchmark standards;*
- *Reviewing current systems and procedures; and,*
- *Developing best practices.*

This is difficult for sole traders or small partnerships to demonstrate and insurers and corporate clients may be losing the expertise of very competent practitioners. BlueBox *partners* offer a menu of options:

- *Regular audits of work, driven by technology that provides assurance to clients and insurers that quality is being maintained;*
- *For Practitioners see our [Homebuyer assessment service](#), this can be extended to Mortgage Valuations also, and;*
- *A package of training and professional*

development that will meet CPD requirements but more importantly will ensure that you maintain your skills to meet the ever changing standards of the 21st Century.

Guidance and training to corporate bodies on what to look for when underwriting property valuations or insured.

Expert witness

BlueBox *partners* has established a reputation for delivering vocational training to the surveying profession based on close involvement with practitioners and the financial services industry served by the profession. Currently there is an unprecedented demand for good, objective experts and we offer you the opportunity to develop the skills to provide the appropriate advice in the expected format. Our training is undertaken by practitioners who have many years of dealing with claims both in surveying and the legal profession. For more information, please see our website or contact us on info@blueboxpartners.com

Surveyor's toolkit

To support the work of the sole trader and small practices, we are continuing to offer access to resources that would otherwise be impossible to arrange. These include:

Rightmove Plus

In this litigious and competitive world one thing becomes clear: valuers must have good comparable evidence to support their decisions. If not, they are vulnerable to challenge. Many surveyors are not assembling robust evidence because they do not have easy access to the actual sales. To plug this gap, BlueBox *partners* has obtained a unique agreement with the country's leading property portal, 'Rightmove'. We are now able to offer access to archived property sales data at a price that is unbeatable anywhere else.



This offer is only available through BlueBox *partners* to small firms and sole practitioners, and we think a price of £50 per month makes this a "must have" for any valuer undertaking residential valuations.

Please note: the fee of £50 per month (per Practitioner/per office) covers unlimited use of the Best Price guide but the use of Rightmove's AVM will incur a charge of £12.50 each.

EIG property auction sales data

EIG run the leading website for property auction sales data in the country. Formed in 1990, the group provide the property industry with detailed information covering the whole of the UK. It is recognised as the industry standard for auction information and currently includes details on over 400,000 properties and over 35,000 lots each year, worth in excess of £5.6 billion.



Access to their database gives:

- The auction brochure;
- Quick retrieval of comparables;
- Help in reducing the risk of negligence claims;
- Immediate auction value, and;
- Location map and photo for all the lots.

Auction data has always been important for commercial and high value residential property. More recently it has featured in the residential market because many possession properties are sold by this method. Many of these do not appear on the Land Registry. Complete the form on our website and we will submit this direct to EIG who will advise on cost and more details of what is available.

Using the social media to promote your business

Mention the term 'social media' to most practitioners and at best they will wrinkle their nose. To discover if this is an appropriate reaction, we are continuing our voyage into the unknown.



In previous newsletters, we have described how we set up a discussion group on the professional networking site 'LinkedIn' to support our diagnosis of dampness initiative. Although activity is occasionally sporadic, we think it provides some useful discussion and is a good place to share technical information with other people interested in specific topic areas (see our newsletter 11 for more information at www.blueboxpartners.com/news/letters/Issue_11_Dec09.pdf).

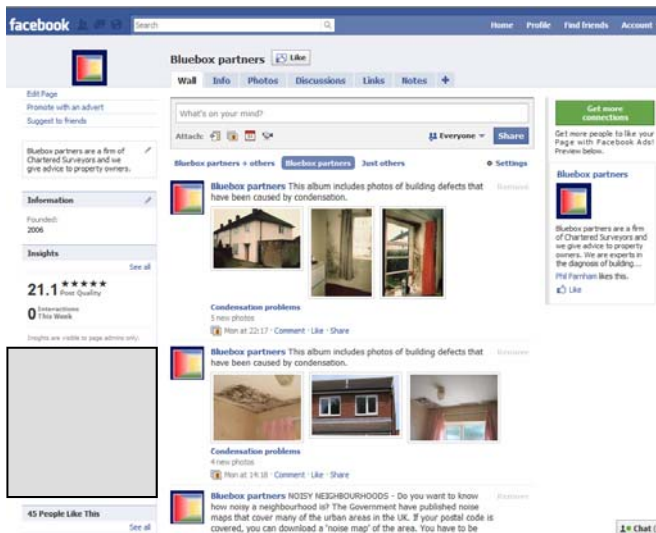
Emboldened by this experience, we have recently created a 'fan page' on Facebook. It is a move about which we are not entirely convinced but with the explosion in the use of Facebook, we felt we could no longer stand on the sidelines.



For example, consider the April statistics for Facebook:

- It has up to 25 million active accounts in the UK;
- Users are not restricted to young people anymore:
 - *Of the 25 million, 40% of users are over 30;*
 - *5 million are between 30—39;*
 - *40—49 year olds account for just over 3 million users, and*
 - *2.2 million are over 50.*

Given this dramatic growth and change in demographic data, it would be foolhardy to ignore. But is it possible to 'monetize' (another one of those sickening American words) this interest in social media? Can practitioners use Facebook to increase their fee income? The answer is simple: we do not know. We intend to monitor our progress and keep you informed in this newsletter. In other words, we are trying it so you don't have to!



Our initial strategy is to provide a 'page' that will be useful and (hopefully) interesting to people who own or rent property. By engaging with a growing network of people in their on-line social environment, our name will become more widely known. When our friends have a need for professional property services, we hope they will turn to us first.

The cost of this initiative is limited to the time we spend on the project, and so the potential is considerable.

Although we still populating the page, we already have 45 'fans' who, admittedly, are at the lower end of the age spectrum (thanks to our enthusiastic children). To get a better assessment of Facebook, we want to increase the average age of our 'fans'. If you (or someone else in your family or social group) have a Facebook account, please visit our page. You can get there by typing www.facebook.com/Blueboxpartners in your internet search engine. If you like what you see, then become our 'fan'. Lets see if we can get into three figures in time for the next newsletter.

Are you on Facebook already?

There are not many surveyors on Facebook but if you are one of them, have you got any experiences you would like to share? Has it made a difference to your business? If it has, please let us know.

New guide for managing asbestos in premises

If you own, occupy, manage or have responsibilities for non-domestic premises which may contain asbestos, or if you are responsible for the non-private parts of domestic premises (like the hall and lift areas in flats) you may find a recently revised leaflet from the Health and Safety Executive of interest. Called 'A short guide to managing asbestos in premises' (ref. INDG223 rev4) it will help you decide how to identify, assess and manage any asbestos-containing materials (ACMs) on your premises.



The HSE claim the guidance (previously called *Managing asbestos in premises*) will be particularly useful if you have small or less complex premises such as a shop or a farm building. For more complex buildings to manage, you may find that *A comprehensive guide to managing asbestos* (HSG227 HSE Books 2002) will provide the more detailed advice that you need. To download a free copy, visit: www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg223.pdf

Contact

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