

Environmental Sustainability

Supporting guidance for the Architects Code of Conduct and Practice

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1. Introduction

Architects have an essential role in responding to the climate and biodiversity crises. Buildings are responsible for a large share of global emissions and place significant pressure on natural resources, ecosystems and communities. In the UK, the built environment sector is central to meeting national net zero commitments and to creating places that are resilient, healthy and socially fair.

The Architects Registration Board has developed this guidance to support architects in meeting their obligations under the Architects Code of Conduct (the Code).

Standard 2 of the Code requires architects to act in the public interest. That includes taking responsibility for the environmental implications of their work and using their professional judgement to help deliver sustainable outcomes. This guidance explains the behaviours that demonstrate compliance with those duties.

While compliance with this guidance is not mandatory, it may be taken into account when considering whether an architect has met the standards expected under the Code. Any architect who departs from it should be prepared to explain their reasons, having exercised appropriate professional judgement.

In this guidance, "must" is used where there is a legal or regulatory requirement. "Should" describes conduct that ARB would normally expect of architects in meeting

their obligations under the Code. "May" is used where the appropriate course of action will depend on the circumstances or where a particular outcome is not inevitable.

2. Your duties under the Code

Standard 2.1 – Use your best endeavours to conserve and enhance the quality of the environment

This means taking a proactive approach to sustainable design, advising clients on ways to reduce environmental harm and achieve net zero, even when final decisions rest with others.

“Best endeavours” means doing everything that is practically possible to help deliver environmentally responsible design, unless prevented by legal, safety, or client-imposed constraints. You do not have to deliver a zero-carbon or regenerative project, but you should be able to demonstrate that you tried – using your expertise, influence, and the opportunities available to you.

The extent of what is reasonable will vary depending on your role and stage of involvement. If you are appointed as lead designer or contract administrator, you may have greater agency to drive sustainable outcomes across the team. If your role is limited – such as a planning-only commission – you should still identify opportunities and constraints, make proportionate recommendations, and document any sustainability-related risks or missed opportunities in writing. In every case, you should embed environmental responsibility in the work you do control.

Standard 3.1 – Maintain appropriate skills and knowledge

This means you should maintain your knowledge of current sustainability practice, technical standards and developments in policy and technology.

3. Key behaviours

Stay informed and keep your knowledge current

Architects should understand the environmental impacts of buildings and the places they shape. You should:

- Understand the sources of carbon emissions and environmental degradation generated by the built environment

- Keep up to date with relevant climate policies, building regulations, and recognised standards (such as the RIBA Climate Challenge, the Low Energy Transformation Initiative, and PAS 2080). This includes the relevant legislation for your country
- Use appropriate tools and specialist input to assess likely environmental performance of projects and compare with relevant benchmark data
- Be aware of local risks such as overheating, flooding, water scarcity and biodiversity loss
- Be able to propose effective means of achieving net zero carbon emissions, reductions in pollution and protecting biodiversity
- Take account of recognised climate projections and foreseeable environmental risks when developing design advice

Give clear, honest advice

You should:

- Explain the environmental implications of design choices
- Present options that improve outcomes across carbon, biodiversity, water, health and social value
- Be frank about the limitations of a design and identify how it could be strengthened

Example:

A client prefers gas boilers for a small housing scheme. You explain how heat pumps cut emissions and running costs, and highlight the risk of costly future retrofit or non-compliance with future standards.

Advocate for better outcomes

Even when others are not prioritising sustainability, you should:

- Champion environmentally responsible design principles from the earliest stages
- Recommend lower-impact materials, systems and processes
- Promote outcomes aligned with net zero, resilience, and ecological health
- Recommend resilient design strategies that anticipate long-term environmental risks, such as overheating or water scarcity

- Share knowledge and experience of delivering sustainable solutions, especially with new generations of practitioners

Example:

For a school refurbishment, you propose a retrofit strategy and show how it improves comfort, reduces energy use, and aligns with public-sector decarbonisation programmes.

Collaborate and influence

Architects are rarely the sole decision-makers, but they can shape outcomes. You should work constructively and collaboratively with clients, engineers, contractors and others to raise standards. In rare cases, if a client insists on environmentally harmful decisions and will not consider alternatives, you should consider what further steps are appropriate. This may include recording your advice, seeking professional or legal advice, limiting the scope of your involvement, or reconsidering whether it remains appropriate to continue with the appointment.

Example:

A developer removes shading devices during value engineering. You explain that this risks breaching the Building Regulations on overheating and may conflict with planning consent tied to the building's external appearance. You recommend lower-cost alternatives that maintain compliance and reduce solar gain.

4. Design strategies

You should understand and apply established sustainable design strategies where they are feasible and within the scope of your appointment. You should recognise the need to balance sustainability with other regulatory requirements such as fire safety, overheating mitigation, acoustics, and structural robustness.

Retrofit first

Prioritise retaining and improving buildings over demolition and new build.

Example:

A disused office-to-residential project retains the concrete frame and upgrades the envelope, cutting embodied carbon significantly.

Fabric first

Improve the performance of the building envelope before relying on technology.

Example:

A housing scheme uses careful junction design to avoid thermal bridging and incorporates heat-recovery ventilation to maintain air quality and reduce heat loss.

Passive design and daylighting

Use location orientation, form, materials and natural systems to reduce energy demand.

Example:

Reading rooms in a library face north for daylight without glare, and high-level natural ventilation reduces the need for mechanical cooling.

Efficient systems and renewables

Minimise energy demand and propose low-carbon systems and renewable technologies where practical.

Example:

A leisure centre uses heat pumps and photovoltaic (PV) panels, reducing grid reliance and aligning with local net zero plans.

Whole-life carbon

Evaluate and report on assessed carbon emissions across construction, operation, maintenance and end-of-life. You should also be aware of emerging tools like digital material passports that allow future reuse and support circular economy goals. Where feasible, include data on materials and products to help future building users make sustainable choices.

Example:

A life-cycle assessment compares cross-laminated timber and steel structural options and informs a lower-carbon choice.

Land use and nature-based solutions

Design with sensitivity to land use, topography, soil and ecosystems. Work with natural features rather than against them, and promote nature-based solutions that provide co-benefits, such as flood control, cooling, and mental wellbeing.

Example:

On a housing site prone to surface flooding, you integrate swales, rain gardens and permeable paving to manage water and enhance biodiversity, reducing the need for piped infrastructure.

Water and biodiversity

Reduce water use and enhance ecological value.

Example:

A retail park refurbishment incorporates green roofs and bioswales to manage runoff and create a biodiverse habitat.

Pollution and waste

Design to minimise construction and operational pollution and eliminate avoidable waste. Consider material durability, recyclability and toxicity, and specify low-emission products wherever possible. Collaborate with the supply chain to ensure waste reduction during construction and advocate for responsible disposal and recycling.

Example:

For a commercial office refurbishment, you specify modular ceiling tiles made from recycled content, and ensure that old materials are sorted and diverted from landfill through a take-back scheme with the supplier.

Circular economy

Designing for disassembly or future reuse should be considered at the earliest stages, especially for interiors and fit-outs. Look for opportunities to use reused or recycled materials and document them for future adaptation.

Example:

A modular office scheme uses bolted frames and recyclable insulation panels to support future disassembly or relocation.

5. Summary

Although architects are not responsible for every environment outcome on a project, passive compliance is not enough: active engagement with climate and environmental responsibility is now a basic expectation of professional practice. Architects should consider the environmental implications of their work, give clear and proportionate advice, and use their knowledge, influence and professional judgement to support better environmental outcomes where this is within their role and scope of appointment.