What, how, then & now

Digital Construction Week saw the launch of the UK BIM Alliance report *A Fresh Way Forward for Product Data*. In her forward, Dr Anne Kemp, chair of the UK BIM Alliance, highlights that the working group behind the report had to navigate its way through "debate, contradictions and ambiguities", while looking for a "practical and positive way forward". Sounds like fun

Following discussions with over 120 people, the report seeks to identify the most pressing issues that industry should address first with respect to product data. Since the introduction of the government's mandate for the use of level 2 BIM on all public sector projects by 2016, it has proved difficult to take a joined-up approach to product data in particular. Under the following seven headings the main conclusions are:

● Structured data: a universally agreed definition for structured product data needs to be agreed, created and formally documented.

● Product data standards: there is no commonly agreed standard for digital product data in the UK or Europe and the standards landscape is fluid and complex.

● The data journey: there is currently no 'golden thread' of product information for the majority of projects. Very little information is driven by use cases and this needs to be considered when developing robust Product Data Templates (PDT). Ten recommendations for principles to underlie the development of this 'golden thread' are set out in the report.

● Product data naming and product identification: UK activities should align with European and International standards and initiatives, and the LEXiCON team should take advantage of the UK BIM Alliance to improve two-way communication with industry.

● Product data hosting: manufacturers and object hosting companies need to develop a standardised way to host and structure product information.

● Product data security: there needs to be a 'spectrum' approach to data security, based on risk.

● Product data steering committee: there needs to be an independent source of information, co-ordination and leadership in the field of product information in the built environment. The report recommends that a Product Data Steering Committee is established, with proper funding to carry out this work.

The report advises manufacturers to learn now about the current state of the standards landscape and, even though common standards are not yet in place, you should structure information and focus on developing a Product Information Management System (PIMS), such that your data can map to the standards when they are ready. Similarly, contractors are advised to align to the standards as they develop, noting that fully structured information will change the way you work, and reduce risk, but also noting that some investment will be required to get there.

The Construction Products Association (CPA) has formally responded to this UK BIM Alliance report. They point out that in addition to providing a data templating tool as highlighted in the report, LEXiCON should also

Dr Justin Furness – presenting a technical update to members at the Regional Members' March meeting in Leeds

provide a governance system to create industry-agreed PDT, along with other features not included in the report. To address the issues around available standards, CPA state that they are looking to the (as yet) unpublished PAS 1192-7 to complement the work being carried out at CEN level. The CPA also strongly encourages manufacturers to structure their data in preparation for when "relevant authorities", led by the trade associations, start to use LEXiCON to develop PDTs.

The report provides a good overview of some of the problems that have dogged the production of structured product data for some time in the UK. While it points to the need for formal BS, EN or ISO standards to help manufacturers to structure their product data, it also points out that such standards will only become available by 2020 at the earliest. It is all very well to suggest that manufacturers should structure their data now, such that they can map to the standards "when they are ready", but there is also a need to understand the realities of the data journey, and how product data needs change during the lifetime of a building, from the early concept through to the end-of-life. While this is acknowledged in the report, data dependencies and validation for bespoke assemblies such as windows and curtain walling, where the data could come from several different manufacturers (e.g. glazing, hardware, finishing), must also be fully considered. Getting from the "what" to the "how" is the real challenge here. ❑

Justin Furness