



Annual Review 2016

SER is wholly owned by the Institution of Structural Engineers (the 'Institution'), and whilst it operates on a commercial basis separately from the Institution, it performs a function that is essentially very different from most commercial companies. This report provides a summary description of the services provided by SER both in general and during 2016 in particular, and highlights the key relationships with our stakeholders.

SER was established in 2004 by the Institution, with the active support of the Institution of Civil Engineers, to provide – initially – a scheme for the certification of structural design carried out pursuant to the Building (Scotland) Regulations. Prior to that time an earlier scheme, in place since 1992, had allowed chartered engineers to sign a certificate of compliance with the structural design section of the Building Regulations, and for such a certificate to be submitted to Local Authorities as part of an application for a Building Warrant. The SER Scheme introduced a peer-reviewed register of chartered structural engineers or chartered civil engineers who are termed Approved Certifiers. They perform a checking and review function of structural design drawings and calculations, and if they are satisfied that the design is compliant with the Building Regulations they issue a certificate to that effect. Except for the very smallest of domestic projects this function is carried out independently from the actual design work. When a certificate is issued under the scheme then the Verifier (in other words the relevant Local Authority in whose area the building is to be constructed) is obliged to accept the certificate as conclusive evidence to that effect, and will normally carry out no other checking in respect of the structural design.

Two important points – both of which impacted on the activities in 2016 as they did in previous years – are that (i) the Scheme is not mandatory, and structural designs can still be submitted direct to the Verifier for approval by them; and (ii) the Approved Certifiers themselves (and their associated organisations – termed Approved Bodies) are audited by SER on a regular basis to provide assurance that the certificates are being properly and competently prepared.

From the inception of the Scheme in Scotland in 2004 a large number of engineers have joined as Approved Certifiers (and their organisations have joined as Approved Bodies). In 2007 a very similar scheme was established in Jersey, although in this case the States of Jersey government decided that it would be mandatory for all submissions for approval of structural design under the Building Bylaws (Jersey) to be made through the Scheme.

More than a decade later SER now operates a mature Scheme of Certification of Structural Design, which is acknowledged as a leading exemplar for independent certification of issues relating to public safety and achievement of appropriate standards in building construction. During 2016 a record number of over 23,000 certificates were issued across the two Schemes by over 400 Approved Certifiers. Research commissioned in 2015 by the Building Standards Division of the Scottish government provides data which indicates that about 85% of all Building Warrants in Scotland are dealt with under the Scheme, and also showed that a high level of satisfaction existed as to the way in which the Scheme was operated, and provided a very favourable comparison in terms of competence against structural design submissions made directly to Verifiers outside the SER Scheme.

In respect of auditing of Approved Certifiers and Approved Bodies, the Scheme in Scotland benefits greatly from the Scottish Registration Board (SRB), with a similar Jersey Registration Board (JRB) for the Scheme in Jersey. The members of the SRB and JRB are experienced practising engineers, who carry out the initial vetting of applicants who wish to join either scheme as an Approved Certifier, or Approved Body. SER also maintains an Audit Pool of engineers who are trained to undertake audits of registered Approved Certifiers and Approved Bodies alongside SRB and JRB members. This is a complex and difficult activity; a two-person Audit team selects a number of projects and then examines the documentation held by the Approved Certifier which demonstrates that the certification of the structural design of the project has been properly and comprehensively carried out. Checks are also carried out on the way in which an Approved Body performs its functions. Audit activities form, by far, the major part of the workload of the engineers who act for the SRB / JRB and the Audit Pool, and it is a particular challenge to ensure that a fair and reasonable approach is taken, whilst maintaining a professional and rigorous standard consistent with the underlying importance of structural design in relation to public safety.

During 2015 a key decision was taken to renew the computer based system which underpins the records and management of the Scheme, the certificates and the audits. The previous computer system had operated since the start of SER, and had become both outdated and restrictive for the staff and for Scheme members. Following a careful review of the requirements with users and with the administrative staff, a bespoke replacement system was placed on order in 2015 and was implemented after extensive trials and testing in October 2016.

I would like to conclude by paying tribute to three groups of people who all play a significant role in the success of SER. Firstly the structural and civil engineers who serve on the SRB (Scotland) and the JRB (Jersey) and on the associated Audit Pools. The Scheme simply could not run without them and their input, and the accumulated knowledge and experience which that brings provides a valued and much appreciated contribution to the engineering profession and to public safety. Secondly, I would like to acknowledge the service provided to SER by the Head of Certification Dr Susan Doran and her colleagues at the Institution, who manage and administer the two Schemes with great care and consideration. Finally, I wish to thank the members of the SER Board of Directors for their hard work and support during the year. The SER Board meets quarterly with a very full agenda, and various Directors also take part in a number of other activities connected to the efficient running of the two Schemes. In conclusion, I am pleased to report that SER has continued to provide an efficient and valuable service as a Scheme Provider during 2016 and looks forward to doing so in the future.

Dr J M Roberts

Chairman