

Structural Engineers Declare summit: driving real change

Diego Padilla-Philipps of the SED steering group looks back on a year of sustainability progress and urges engineers to focus on their carbon handprint in the year ahead.

It has been six years since the Structural Engineers Declare movement began. And last October we hosted our fifth annual summit.

It is wonderful to see how much things have changed around us, and all the great work we are doing to make a positive impact.

2025 was a year full of progress for our profession and the wider industry:

→| **The UK Net Zero Carbon Building Standard Pilot** (www.nzcbuildings.co.uk/) launched. This is the result of a great effort by multidisciplinary professionals from many, many organisations. (And, just recently, the

IStructE released a practical guide to implementing the standard: www.istructe.org/resources/guidance/nzcb-embodied-carbon/.)

→| **The Engineers Reuse Collective** (<https://terc.org.uk/>) was created, aiming to promote the reuse of existing buildings and materials. This is the most fundamental and meaningful action we can take to reduce how much stuff we use.

→| The industry has evolved its understanding of the implications of using higher percentages of **ground granulated blast-furnace slag (GGBS)** and **scrap steel**. The IStructE

and the Climate Group have helped with very good publications on these materials (see www.istructe.org).

- | Other industry initiatives to decarbonise concrete, such as the **AC-DG** group and **Concrete Zero** (www.theclimategroup.org/concretezero), continue to grow.
- | The principles of **regenerative design** are becoming better understood.

At the same time, voices on the other side of the spectrum have become louder and have found strong leadership that is trying to reverse all the amazing progress we have made.

But we are not going to fall for misinformation. The facts are clear: our planet is at breaking point, it is already showing signs of distress everywhere, and it is because of human activity.

This is not a debate about global warming (and anyone who oversimplifies it like that). It is about how we use our natural resources beyond planetary boundaries and what we do with them. It is about the unsustainable extraction, production and disposal of materials. It is about energy security, water, extreme weather, famine and modern slavery. It is about communities and livelihoods; billions of humans being at risk because of our actions.

It is more than politics, it is beyond politics... it is about the human race, our role in history and our survival.

But the signs are also optimistic:

- | Sustainability has become a fundamental part of the work that we do.
- | Our clients, our cities, demand sustainable buildings.
- | Economies around the world are seeing the benefits of sustainable development, clean energy and more.

Our role as designers has never been more important. At Structural Engineers Declare our purpose is to advocate for better buildings, lower-carbon buildings, those that integrate regenerative design principles, to restore our planet and work for the next generation, our friends,



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→| As designers, structural engineers are uniquely placed to deliver environmental benefits through their carbon handprint



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families, children and grandchildren.

It has never been more important to be a good structural engineer, to design efficiently, to innovate, to create better buildings.

And it has never been more exciting either, because we can make real change. We have the power in our hands, our calculations; the carbon footprint of our designs – our carbon handprint – is so much greater than anything else we can do as individuals... that is our responsibility.

Ethics, commitments and material sourcing

Our 2025 summit brought together engineers, designers and sustainability experts to share their experiences, tackle key challenges, and rethink the role of structural engineering in an era of limited resources.

The summit began with a powerful keynote to start a conversation about ethics in practice: how we make decisions that balance the needs of people, planet and profit. The talk presented life as a social enterprise, explaining that 'compassion is the basis for morality'.

The summit continued with a discussion on the role of Structural Engineers Declare, the commitments and how they need to adapt. We presented our proposed changes to the commitments. We shared the reasons and method to update them. This was in response to feedback from our members, to address how relevant and impactful the movement is. We went through a process of comparing our commitments to those of Architects and Building Services Declare, separating out complex clauses, clarifying the language and combining similar points, and removing clauses that might not be relevant to us. We have ended up with a list of clear aims which we should be able to benchmark against in the future.

The next session focused on material sourcing, looking beyond carbon and exploring the broader environmental and social impacts of extraction. It examined how we use materials and how we can build more resilient and responsible supply chains.

Finally, a panel of industry leaders shared their experience of creating climate action plans for their companies

and how they are doing now.

We hope that learnings from the day will encourage engineers to go further, so we can continue to build on the success of the past five years.

The time is now. And our role as structural engineers is fundamental to drive real change. As we enter 2026, let's all consider how we can reduce our carbon handprint this year.

This article was prepared on behalf of the Structural Engineers Declare steering group: Bryony Benn, Emma Francois, Ed Hoare, Brogan MacDonald, Diego Padilla-Philipps, Ian Poole, David Rivers and Kye Taylor.

Watch the sessions

If you weren't able to attend the summit, watch recordings of the day's sessions at www.istructe.org/resources/training/structural-engineers-declare-summit-2025/.



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