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DGNB certification: systematically reducing the carbon footprint of existing buildings

The German Sustainable Building Council (DGNB) has released an updated version of its certification system for buildings in use. Under the new system, property owners, operators and users can plan sustainable property strategies for existing buildings, simultaneously laying emphasis on climate protection. Certification also functions as a management tool to help decision-makers pinpoint appropriate optimisation measures for individual buildings, implement continuous improvement processes and actively manage risk. Certification can be applied to entire property portfolios or individual buildings, irrespective of the specific usage category. Buildings already operating with a zero carbon footprint can also receive the DGNB Climate Positive award.

Similar to other areas of industry, more and more attention is being given to climate protection in the building sector. Until now, however, there have been no instruments for systematically dealing with existing buildings. "This is precisely the issue the DGNB is addressing with the new certification system for buildings in use," states Johannes Kreissig, DGNB Managing Director. "The certification makes it possible to manage existing buildings in line with objectives, across the board, without overlooking factors relating to specific buildings." The thinking behind the DGNB System is that decision-makers require transparency regarding buildings – they need certainty regarding tangible features, how buildings are used and consumption data. Without sufficient transparency, it is impossible to make well-informed decisions regarding investments in specific measures.

The overall aim of the certification system is to actively help property owners and building operators when making demonstrable improvements to their assets, and to allow them to leverage the full potential of buildings to reduce carbon footprints, in the most economical way, thus preparing them for

future needs. The first step for people operating buildings is to join forces with occupants and users of the premises and exploit all opportunities to optimise how buildings are operated. This should be before one starts thinking about construction measures. It is generally less expensive to optimise how a building is currently operated, and indeed sometimes this course of action unveils major potential to make savings. Once this step has been completed, it is time to plan further measures, if necessary involving refurbishments.

A lean system based on nine criteria

DGNB certification for buildings in use revolves around nine criteria that address the key issues that dictate sustainable building operation – without forgetting the broader picture. As well as looking at environmental factors, the system also considers sociocultural issues, economic factors and risk. The aim is to add transparency in all possible areas regarding the current condition of a building and how efficiently it is being operated. For instance, the criteria cover all influences on a building resulting from how it is used.

Most of the criteria used by the system are based on plan-do-check-act principles. This ensures that evaluations conducted for certification go further than just focusing on the quality of a building. “There are also rewards for setting ambitious goals, basing strategies on these goals, implementing measures accordingly within facility management and continually monitoring progress according to these goals,” states Kreissig.

From a broader perspective, a core aspect of the new DGNB certification system is how key building indicators are measured and evaluated. For example, any lessons learned regarding actual consumption rates or certain building features provide a basis for planning specific improvement measures. Without looking at the actual performance of a building, it is not possible to plan or implement meaningful steps in the next round of improvements. For example, the system defines at what point planned measures should come into effect to slot in as efficiently as possible with ongoing building operations and at the same time optimise expenditures.

Climate action roadmap and the DGNB Climate Positive award

Certification automatically triggers new processes, and these can be used to plan climate action roadmaps for individual projects – and thus embark on a journey towards achieving a zero carbon footprint by 2050 (at the latest). This forms part of the criterion called Climate Action and Energy, which accounts for 30 per cent of the overall score and is the most strongly weighted factor in the certification process.

It is this area that involves assessment of the specific carbon footprint of a building. Each evaluation looks at a specific year. First, an assessment is made of greenhouse gas emissions resulting from the energy that is consumed when a building is used. This is then compared to any emissions avoided by generating local power and exporting energy to other locations.

If a building already has a zero carbon footprint (or better), as well as receiving a DGNB Certificate in platinum, gold, silver or bronze, it also receives a DGNB Climate Positive award. The Climate Positive award is valid for the year of the evaluation.

Suitable for individual buildings and portfolios

“An important credo with climate protection is to just get on with it, and that’s exactly what the new system allows you to do,” states Kreissig. “It provides you with important pointers and creates transparency regarding the actual quality of a building, consumption patterns and emissions resulting from using the building.” Based on this, certification provides a practical tool for management to plan a sustainable, future-oriented property strategy with a clear focus on climate protection.

Despite this, the new certification system is not just aimed at flagship projects. For example, professionals working in the property or housing industry – or large companies and town councils with a number of buildings – can use the certification system as an effective tool for managing portfolios. Finally, it provides benchmarks for comparing individual buildings, makes it possible to lower operating costs and expenditures, and reduces investment risk.

A new system for all kinds of buildings in all kinds of countries

A variety of customers in the property industry have asked about the new system in recent months – and put it through its paces in a practical setting. They have also offered the DGNB feedback. “We received a lot of positive feedback,” states Kreissig. “The general tenor is that the new DGNB System for Buildings in Use adds tangible value, not only if you’re planning a sustainable property strategy but also in ongoing facility management if you’re on a journey to becoming carbon-neutral.”

Unlike the previous version from 2016, the new update to the DGNB System for Buildings In Use can be applied to buildings used for all kinds of purposes. It also makes it possible to certify projects outside Germany. As in the past, the new DGNB certification for buildings in use is valid for three years. Recertification is possible if consumption data can be reviewed annually, which is usually less resource-intensive and less expensive.

To also gain the Climate Positive award on a continual basis, appropriate data must be submitted annually so that the DGNB can check the carbon footprint of a building. The DGNB also provides a variety of free tools to help users of the certification system understand how carbon footprint assessments work and plan climate protection roadmaps.

Next training sessions in Frankfurt and Munich

The DGNB Academy acts as a staff training and education platform and will be offering opportunities in the coming months to undergo training on using the new certification system for buildings in use. The next practice module focuses on preparing existing buildings for the future and will take place on

March 24 in Frankfurt and on May 7 in Munich. To register online for either course go to www.dgnb-akademie.de.

About the DGNB German Sustainable Building Council

The DGNB German Sustainable Building Council was founded in 2007 and has around 1200 members, making it Europe's biggest network for sustainable building. The aim of the DGNB is to promote sustainability in the construction and real estate industry and instil awareness of building sustainability among the broader population. The DGNB is an independent non-profit organisation. Its certification system offers a planning and optimisation tool for evaluating sustainable buildings and urban districts. It was developed to help organisations enhance the tangible sustainability of construction projects. The DGNB System is based on the concept of holistic sustainability, placing equal emphasis on the environment, people and commercial viability. The DGNB Academy is an education and training platform that has already provided more than 3500 people from nearly 40 countries with official qualifications in sustainable building.

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