Reducing thermal bridging at junctions when designing and installing solid wall insulation

Caroline Weeks, Tim Ward and Colin King
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The Publisher
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Garston
Watford
Herts WD25 9XX
Tel: +44 (0) 1923 664761
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Printed using FSC or PEFC material from sustainable forests.

FB 61
First published 2013

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Cover photographs:
Typical external wall insulation being applied (left)
Thermal bridging modelling image of an external wall/ground floor junction (top right)
Thermal image of a dwelling (bottom right; courtesy of Joanne Hopper)
# Contents

Executive summary

## 1 Introduction

## 2 Background

2.1 Risks associated with thermal bridging 3
2.2 Solid wall constructions modelled 3
2.3 Key junction details modelled 4

## 3 Detailing of external wall insulation

3.1 Window jamb 5
3.2 Window head 6
3.3 Window sill 7
3.4 Eaves 8
3.5 External wall/ground floor junction 9
3.6 Party wall/external wall junction 10
3.7 Quality control on site 11
3.8 Conclusions for external wall insulation 11

## 4 Detailing of internal wall insulation

4.1 Interstitial condensation risk 13
4.2 Window jamb 13
4.3 Window head 14
4.4 Window sill 16
4.5 Intermediate floor/external wall junction (within the same dwelling) 17
4.6 Intermediate floor/external wall junction (in apartments) 18
4.7 Party wall/external wall junction 19
4.8 Quality control on site 20
4.9 Conclusions for internal wall insulation 20

## 5 Comparing the overall thermal performance of external and internal insulation

5.1 Conclusions for external versus internal wall insulation of solid walls 21

## 6 References

24
With the advent of the Green Deal, Energy Company Obligation (ECO) and other financial incentives to improve the UK’s existing building stock, there has never been a more relevant time to push the construction industry towards better performance. Current practice during refurbishment does little or nothing to minimise the effects of thermal bridging or inconsistency in thermal envelope performance. This guide sets out clear principles and methods that should be considered and adopted during the design and installation of solid wall insulation in order to reduce thermal bridging effects, maximise carbon dioxide (CO₂) emission reductions and minimise the risk of condensation.

The effect of installing external and internal wall insulation in typical solid wall homes has been modelled for junctions with windows, eaves, floors and party walls. Potential problems are considered, taking examples from recent refurbishment projects in which BRE has been involved. This BRE Trust Report will be a useful resource for public and private clients looking to improve the performance of their properties and for architects/designers, specifiers and installers.
1 Introduction

Improving the energy efficiency of the existing building stock is one of the biggest challenges facing the UK. In particular, traditional solid wall houses are more difficult and more costly to improve than more modern, cavity wall constructions. Initiatives such as the Green Deal should serve to finally encourage such refurbishment. However, current industry practice does little or nothing to minimise the effects of thermal bridging or inconsistency in thermal envelope performance when installing insulation in solid wall dwellings. Making the effort to minimise thermal bridges is considered likely to add more time and expense to what is already regarded as a costly improvement measure.

This BRE Trust Report seeks to highlight the importance of appropriate detailing for both externally and internally applied solid wall insulation and demonstrates its effect on heat flow and potential condensation risk at key junctions.
3 Detailing of external wall insulation

3.1 Window jamb

For the window jamb junction in the ‘uninsulated’ base case, it is assumed that the window frame is situated in the centre of the wall cross-section, with external render and internal plaster returned to the window frame (Figure 2a). In the case where the wall is externally insulated, it is assumed that the insulation will run flush to the edge of the jamb and the render finish will again be returned to the window (Figure 2c).

To improve this junction, it is recommended that a fillet of insulation is applied within the window reveal prior to rendering (Figure 2d). In this ‘improved’ case, a 20 mm thickness of insulation with a thermal conductivity of 0.02 W/mK (such as phenolic foam) is assumed, since typically there will be a 30–40 mm space between the existing wall and any opening casement windows that may be present. In reality, the thickness of the applied insulation has to be tailored to the available space within the reveal, and a lack of such space is often quoted as the reason why improved detailing cannot be practically achieved.

Such restrictions are lessened if new windows are installed at the same time as the external insulation is applied. In such circumstances it is then possible to design appropriate window frame arrangements to allow the desired insulation detail to be included. There may also be scope to insulate across the entire cross-section of the wall at the reveal, but this is not explored in this study. This issue regarding replacement windows applies also to the window head and window sill junctions that follow.

The application of the external insulation to the wall significantly reduces the U-value of the wall, hence reducing the overall heat loss. However, the concentration of different-coloured bands around the location of the window frame in Figure 2c indicates the rapid temperature drop across this particular location. The Ψ-value of Figure 2c is significantly higher than the base-case Ψ-value in Figure 2b, the reason being that although the heat loss through the wall itself has been reduced, there is more lateral heat loss flowing towards the junction.

It is interesting to note that, despite this concentration of heat flow at the junction, the temperature factor at the coldest internal point of the junction (where the plaster meets the window frame) has in fact improved from the base case and does not drop below the critical value of 0.75.

Figure 2d includes additional insulation returned into the reveal. Here the Ψ-value has returned (i.e., reduced) to a more acceptable value and the temperature factor has risen again, hence further reducing the risk of condensation or mould growth at the junction.

Figure 2: Junction detail for window jamb
a: ‘Uninsulated’ detail
b: ‘Uninsulated’ modelling results
c: ‘Typical’ external insulation
d: ‘Improved’ external insulation
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Modern methods of house construction: a surveyor’s guide.</td>
<td>FB 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime opportunity profiling of streets (COPS): a quick crime analysis – rapid implementation approach.</td>
<td>FB 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subsidence damage to domestic buildings: a guide to good technical practice.</td>
<td>FB 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainable refurbishment of Victorian housing: guidance, assessment method and case studies.</td>
<td>FB 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putting a price on sustainable schools.</td>
<td>FB 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knock it down or do it up?</td>
<td>FB 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micro-wind turbines in urban environments: an assessment.</td>
<td>FB 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siting micro-wind turbines on house roofs.</td>
<td>FB 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automatic fire sprinkler systems: a guide to good practice.</td>
<td>FB 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complying with the Code for Sustainable Homes: lessons learnt on the BRE Innovation Park.</td>
<td>FB 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The move to low-carbon design: are designers taking the needs of building users into account?</td>
<td>FB 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building-mounted micro-wind turbines on high-rise and commercial buildings.</td>
<td>FB 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The real cost of poor housing.</td>
<td>FB 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A guide to the Simplified Building Energy Model (SBEM): what it does and how it works.</td>
<td>FB 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacant dwellings in England: the challenges and costs of bringing them back into use.</td>
<td>FB 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy efficiency in new and existing buildings: comparative costs and CO₂ savings.</td>
<td>FB 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and productivity benefits of sustainable schools: a review.</td>
<td>FB 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrating BREEAM throughout the design process: a guide to achieving higher BREEAM and Code for Sustainable Homes ratings through incorporation with the RIBA Outline Plan of Work and other procurement routes.</td>
<td>FB 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design fires for use in fire safety engineering.</td>
<td>FB 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ventilation for healthy buildings: reducing the impact of urban pollution.</td>
<td>FB 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financing UK carbon reduction projects.</td>
<td>FB 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The cost of poor housing in Wales.</td>
<td>FB 32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynamic comfort criteria for structures: a review of UK standards, codes and advisory documents.</td>
<td>FB 33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water mist fire protection in offices: experimental testing and development of a test protocol.</td>
<td>FB 34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Airtightness in commercial and public buildings. 3rd edn.</td>
<td>FB 35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biomass energy.</td>
<td>FB 36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental impact of insulation.</td>
<td>FB 37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental impact of vertical cladding.</td>
<td>FB 38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental impact of floor finishes: incorporating The Green Guide ratings for floor finishes.</td>
<td>FB 39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LED lighting.</td>
<td>FB 40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radon in the workplace. 2nd edn.</td>
<td>FB 41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U-value conventions in practice.</td>
<td>FB 42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lessons learned from community-based microgeneration projects: the impact of renewable energy capital grant schemes.</td>
<td>FB 43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy management in the built environment: a review of best practice.</td>
<td>FB 44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The cost of poor housing in Northern Ireland.</td>
<td>FB 45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ninety years of housing, 1921–2011.</td>
<td>FB 46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BREEAM and the Code for Sustainable Homes on the London 2012 Olympic Park.</td>
<td>FB 47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saving money, resources and carbon through SMARTWaste.</td>
<td>FB 48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concrete usage in the London 2012 Olympic Park and the Olympic and Paralympic Village and its embodied carbon content.</td>
<td>FB 49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A guide to the use of urban timber.</td>
<td>FB 50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low flow water fittings: will people accept them?</td>
<td>FB 51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evacuating vulnerable and dependent people from buildings in an emergency.</td>
<td>FB 52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refurbishing stairs in dwellings to reduce the risk of falls and injuries.</td>
<td>FB 53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with difficult demolition wastes: a guide.</td>
<td>FB 54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security glazing: is it all that it’s cracked up to be?</td>
<td>FB 55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The essential guide to retail lighting.</td>
<td>FB 56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental impact of metals.</td>
<td>FB 57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental impact of brick, stone and concrete.</td>
<td>FB 58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design of low-temperature domestic heating systems.</td>
<td>FB 59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance of photovoltaic systems on non-domestic buildings.</td>
<td>FB 60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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