

An Irish SME's perspective on Agrément certification

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GERRY MCCARTHY, FRAMEFORM STEEL SYSTEMS LTD



NSAI

Assuring the safety of new construction methods

An interview with Gerry McCarthy of Frameform Steel Systems Ltd.

While certain standards such as ISO 9001 Quality Management Systems are recognised by most people, Agrément certification is less well-known outside the construction industry.



“The end user probably doesn’t know what Agrément certification is, but for developers, architects and engineers, it’s crucial because it eliminates questions and doubts,” says Gerry McCarthy

of Frameform Steel Systems Ltd, which manufactures light-gauge steel framing systems for multi-occupancy buildings.

Agrément certification gives assurance to everyone involved that a building will stand the test of time. This is particularly important for products that are not yet covered by standards, he adds.

Understanding Agrément certification

Agrément is a form of certification designed specifically for new building materials, products and processes for which published national standards do not yet exist.

These days, those typically consist of modern methods of construction (MMC), which include off-site or 2D panelised systems and 3D volumetric, for example. These innovations aim to boost and support the sustainability and digital capabilities of new or retrofitted buildings.

“MMC is a different way of providing a building to the developer or end user,” says Gerry. *“It’s not about building on-site with traditional blocks or bricks. It’s about bringing that process into the factory, and creating that building in the factory, using technology such as 2D panels, 3D modular systems and 3D printing.”*

The Frameform Steel Frame Building System is certified for use in the construction of buildings up to 10 storeys or 30 metres in height. The certification covers assessment of materials and workmanship, structure, fire safety, site preparation and resistance to moisture, sound and the conservation of fuel and energy.

Innovating to provide much-needed housing

As the Irish government strives to accelerate the update of MMC under Housing for All, it's vital that all in the industry as well as the public can trust in the quality and safety of MMC products and materials. In fact, the Housing Agency specifically points to Agrément certification as a way for construction and materials companies to fulfil their compliance obligations.

For innovative Irish businesses in the sector such as Dundalk-based FrameForm, Agrément offers a way to certify the quality of their new products and help to safeguard all who work, live in and use new buildings.

NSAI Agrément Certificates are proof that certified products are 'proper materials' that are suitable for their intended use under Irish site conditions, and in line with the Irish Building Regulations.



Sustainability drives need for certification

Gerry McCarthy, an experienced construction industry entrepreneur now involved in leading Frameform, has long experience with certification processes, having first engaged with them while working in the UK over two decades ago.

He became familiar with both BRE (Building Research Establishment) and BBA (British Board of Agrément) certifications, and got his first BBA certification for a steel frame system in 2004. His previous company, Vision Built, was the first in Ireland to get NSAI certification for steel frame construction.

As the climate crisis intensifies, however, product certification is going to become more critical than ever as each building's carbon footprint must become as low as possible, says Gerry.

"Certification will be utmost because we are going completely into new territory and the industry is changing dramatically."

At present, some developers remain reluctant to shift to MMC because of a perceived cost burden. *"As [climate-related] penalties start coming into it for developers, MMC will gain a significant foothold in the market,"* says Gerry. *"Agrément certification will be crucial for us because when that pivot happens, we will be ahead of the curve with a product that has instantly recognised certification from NSAI."*

Preparing for the certification process

Knowing how vital certification would be for it to gain traction in the construction sector, Frameform turned to NSAI Agrément, which assesses new products and processes in building and materials technology, and issues Agrément certificates for them.

Getting certified needn't be an arduous or protracted process for any company involved with MMC, says Gerry, once it does its research ahead of time and are prepared to put written standard operating procedures (SOPs) in place across their business.

"It's important to know what is being certified, what is behind it, what the certification body wants and what testing and criteria you need in place for the product to get certified," he explains.

"It's also not just about certifying the product. It's a good chance to look at the structure of the company, from the minute an enquiry comes in until the product goes out, and how everything is tracked in between."

He also emphasises the value of the audit process to companies seeking certification. *"A lot of companies are afraid of being audited and certified,"* says Gerry. *"I'm never afraid of a good audit, because someone might question something you're doing and point to how you can improve it."*

 [frameform-steel-systems-ltd](https://www.linkedin.com/company/frameform-steel-systems-ltd)

+ NSAI Agrément is responsible for Agrément assessment and certification.

+ To find out more about our work, visit nsai.ie/certification/agreement-certification



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