

3 MEASURES FOR A BETTER, GREENER BUILT ENVIRONMENT



**#BUILDING
LIFE**

**GENERAL
ELECTION
2024**

TURN EMPTY BUILDINGS INTO QUALITY HOMES

The housing crisis is the biggest issue for many voters. Yet, many properties in our town and city centres are vacant, derelict or under-occupied [1].

Bringing back these properties into use through high-quality renovations represents a unique opportunity to address the housing crisis, and make our city, town, and village centres more vibrant, while enhancing air quality and restoring the cultural and aesthetic value of these areas. It is also the most cost-effective way to address both operational[2] and embodied[3] carbon emissions in the built environment, as well as transport emissions[4].

While many actions have been taken in recent years to address these challenges, from the launch of the Vacant Homes Action Plan to significant increases in funding to address vacancy rates and support energy renovation, holistic, coordinated actions are urgently needed.

HOW?

- **Improve accessibility for all building owners to regeneration and renovation grants** by making a single organisation responsible for these, the Sustainability Energy Authority of Ireland.
- **Audit the existing building stock to evaluate what is available for use and where**, and to assess what additional space and home types may be needed.[5]
- **Align all public policy measures, such as building and planning regulations and financial incentives, with Ireland's climate action targets**, making sure they don't work against each other.
- **Extend the "First Home Scheme" to include existing properties located in village, town, and city centres, and improve specific funding mechanisms for bringing back vacant spaces "above the shop" into use**, targeting both individuals and small businesses.
- **Set up a Citizens' Assembly on housing and climate action to build consensus around potentially contentious policies** on how to meet the housing needs of a growing population while reducing carbon emissions in a fair and balanced way.

[1] The ground floor commercial vacancy rate in towns in Ireland is 18- 31% – the normal target at a European level is 5%. The upper floors in towns are at c. 80% - both these levels are unheard of in a European context. Source: Collaborative Town Centre Health Check Programme.

[2] Greenhouse gas emissions arising from all energy consumed by an asset in-use, during the operational stage of its life cycle.

[3] Covers the entire carbon emissions associated with materials and construction processes throughout the whole lifecycle of a building. The embodied carbon of a deep residential retrofit is a quarter of a new build. Sources: [Kinnane, O. et al., 2022](#).

[4] CSO data show that people living in central locations are usually less reliant on cars hence contributing to a reduction in our fastest growing source of carbon emissions, transport.

[5] The trend of smaller households is likely to continue and to get closer to the EU average over the next few years. Therefore, the mix of home sizes needs to be re-evaluated with a sufficiency of 3- and 4-bedroom homes likely already within the existing stock. This recommendation is fully aligned with Recommendation 6 of the Housing Commission Report.

BUILD LOW CARBON HOMES IN GREEN, WELL-CONNECTED NEIGHBOURHOODS

According to the latest projections, 400,000 homes must be built by 2030 to meet our housing needs. These homes must not only be delivered fast, and be affordable, but they must also be designed and built to help achieve Ireland's statutory target of a 51% reduction in emissions by 2030.

More specifically, new homes must be highly energy efficient, have good walking, cycling and public transport connections to public amenities[1], and be built more sustainably to address embodied carbon emissions. This approach will also ensure new homes are cheaper to run, improve people's quality of life, and contribute to better use of scarce resources.

The public sector, including the Land Development Agency and local authorities, has a key role to play in this transition, and must lead by example to drive change in the market and build capacity within the industry.

HOW?

- **Undertake a review of Ireland's planning and building regulations to understand how they can better support the decarbonisation of the built environment**, and the delivery of our national climate objectives.
- **Mandate the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to direct public bodies procuring or giving grant aid for new residential developments** (including social and affordable homes) **to make the award of a contract or funding conditional on the successful applicant demonstrating how they will address whole life carbon emissions[2], reduce transport emissions, future-proof their residential developments to adapt to a changing climate, and enhance biodiversity**. This could be achieved through green building certifications such as the [Home Performance Index](#) [3] or at minimum compliance with the EU taxonomy for Sustainable Activities.



[1] The latest EPA "Ireland's State of the Environment" report stresses that "High-level integration between land use planning and transport planning is needed to achieve more compact development, incentivise a move away from private cars, and move trips to rail, bus, cycling and walking. Shifting to these modes is an essential part of a sustainable and climate-neutral transition for the transport sector."

[2] The global warming potential (GWP) over a building's whole life cycle indicates the building's overall contribution to emissions that lead to climate change. It brings together greenhouse gas emissions embodied in construction products with emissions from the use stage i.e., associated with heating, cooling and lighting a building – [Energy Performance of Buildings Directive](#)

[3] The Home Performance Index (HPI) is Ireland's national certification for new homes. It is independently assessed and awards certificates with a rating of HPI or Gold HPI for the standard of a home's design, construction and environmental sustainability.

URGENTLY SUPPORT THE DECARBONISATION OF THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY [1]

Scientific projections show that current policies and legislation will not be sufficient to deliver a cut of 51% of our carbon emissions by 2030[2]. Without prioritising the need to address embodied carbon emissions, the construction sector will exceed this target[3]. Ireland needs, therefore, to urgently accelerate the steps it is taking to address the whole life carbon impact of construction and the built environment.

HOW?

- **Introduce carbon targets for different building types by 1 January 2028**[4] (at the very latest) in line with other EU member states, such as Denmark and France.
- **Require a full assessment of the carbon impact of all projects included in the National Development Plan (NDP) and prioritise their development (where necessary)** to ensure the infrastructure we need is delivered without compromising a reduction in our carbon emissions.
- **Pilot, and invest in the creation of new value chains and infrastructure for reused and biobased materials.** E.g., Provide financial incentives or directly fund research and production facilities for biobased construction materials, such as CLT, sheep's wool and hemp.



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[2] Building in a Climate Emergency (BIACE) Research Lab, UCD School of Architecture, Building a Zero Carbon Ireland (2022) - EPA "Ireland's State of the Environment" (2024).

[3] Construction and built environment sectors account for 37% of Ireland's carbon emissions, equalling agriculture. Just under two thirds (23%) of these emissions come from operating buildings but more than a third (14%) comes from the manufacture, transport and installation of building materials themselves – usually referred to as 'Embodied Carbon'.

[4] Under the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive, Member states shall ensure that the life-cycle GWP is calculated and disclosed in the energy performance certificate of the building: (a) from 1 January 2028, for all new buildings with a useful floor area larger than 1 000 m²; (b) from 1 January 2030, for all new buildings.