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**ENVIRONMENT, HERITAGE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

**OPENING ADDRESS AT THE**

**CONFERENCE ON ENERGY EFFICIENCY FOR SUSTAINABLE  
COMMUNITIES**

**DUBLIN CASTLE**

**28<sup>th</sup> JANUARY 2008**

Good Morning everyone. I am delighted to be here today in Dublin Castle with such a large gathering, for this Conference.

Just last March the Joint Housing Committee of the RIAI and my Department organised a very well attended and successful housing conference in Santry. Even in the short intervening period the sector has continued to evolve with new developments, such as the recent introduction of the new Part L Building Regulations.

So this conference, with its themes around implementation of Part L, new approaches to dwelling design and how planning can support energy efficiency, is both welcome and timely. I want to congratulate the Sustainable Communities and Housing Committee for putting together such an interesting and very relevant programme.

The strong attendance here is a testament to a growing interest in the themes to be explored today.

We now face a new reality which needs to be acknowledged. Climate change is a scientific reality that is defining our political and, in turn, our economic reality. We are bound by international targets to reduce carbon emissions and this responsibility will not change nor will the targets suddenly disappear. We need to wake up to these realities now and react in a positive way. Addressing energy efficiency and sustainability issues need not be an obstacle to long-term success; it is, in fact, essential for it.

Yesterday, many of you will have taken part in the pre conference tour around the city. The projects visited demonstrate various aspects of energy efficient measures in terms of sustainable planning and energy efficient construction.

They are all fine examples of what can be achieved. The low energy mixed use development at Elm Park is a highly innovative project delivered by the private sector and public funding provided by my own Department, through Dublin City Council, is funding the high profile York Street project. You will hear more about both of these through the case studies later on today.

### **Housing policy**

Sustainability, which features strongly in the conference programme, initially came to prominence in a more purely environmental context but its application in the housing area is valid. The Government's housing policy statement - **Delivering Homes, Sustaining Communities** - focuses on the sustainability of housing from all dimensions – social, economic and environmental.

This policy statement sets out a vision to guide the transformation of the Irish housing sector over the next ten years, by delivering more and better quality housing responses and by doing this in a more strategic way, focused on the building of sustainable communities.

And what do we mean by sustainable communities? Quite simply, we mean places where people want to live and work, now and in the future. They meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, are sensitive to their environment, and contribute to a high quality of life. They are safe and inclusive. They are well-planned, built and run. And they offer equality of opportunity and good services for all.

### **My Department's role**

My Department, through its various mechanisms of policy, legislation and guidance, focuses its aims and objectives on the promotion of quality in the built environment.

Recent guidance documents such as Quality Housing for Sustainable Communities 2007 have focused on the process surrounding the delivery of quality housing for sustainable communities and the promotion of better place-making through the delivery of quality neighbourhoods and homes.

Part of this new approach is to ensure that all new developments and urban design frameworks are socially, environmentally and economically sustainable. The key is to provide high quality environments that meet the needs and, as far as possible, the preferences of residents, and to foster the development of sustainable communities, through improved settlement patterns, and better use of our resources in terms of the consolidation of our urban centres.

The new urban design objectives are core to the delivery of sustainable communities. The promotion of quality in the built environment requires quality design at the urban level and at the neighbourhood level to deliver better place-making.

Included in the guidance is a review of spatial standards, lifetime adaptability and energy efficiency. It is paramount that designing for sustainability achieves energy efficiency at construction stage and during the lifetime of the scheme,

### **Building Energy Rating**

As you are all well aware, the EU Directive on the Energy Performance of Buildings, which was transposed into Irish law in 2006, introduced a requirement for a Building Energy Rating System or BER as it is more commonly known. Essentially buildings will have an energy rating similar to the way white goods are rated.

The system will inform and empower the consumer and will become an important factor in the housing market.

The BER system, which is being administered by Sustainable Energy Ireland, is being rolled out in 3 phases. BER of new dwellings was introduced with effect from the 1<sup>st</sup> of January last year, however a transitional exemption applies to new dwellings for which planning permission was applied for before the end of 2006, provided the new dwelling is substantially completed by the end of June this year. In relation to non-domestic buildings, buildings commencing from July this year will require a BER Certificate. Finally from the 1<sup>st</sup> of January next year, any existing building being offered for sale or rent must have a BER Certificate.

It is very important that practitioners like yourselves are familiar with the requirements of the BER so as to be able to advise clients of their legal obligations.

The BER Certificate will prove to be a useful selling point for many vendors and landlords, as an A rated house, which is much more economic to run, will be a more attractive proposition than a C rated house. The BER system will hopefully encourage individuals to make the necessary changes to their dwellings to improve energy efficiency and encourage the building of more energy efficient, and ultimately more marketable, homes.

### **Part L of the Building Regulations**

It is very important that we constantly strive to improve the energy efficiency of our buildings. Against the ever growing threat of global warming we must seek to minimise our emissions as much as possible. The residential sector's energy related CO2 emissions represents 27% of total energy attributable emissions. It's a huge figure. Obviously the BER system will help encourage energy efficiency.

However, I have recently introduced new Building Regulations, as promised in the Programme for Government, which will require new dwellings to achieve a 40% reduction in primary energy consumption and a 40% reduction in related CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. These new Regulations will come into effect on 1<sup>st</sup> July this year, with a transitional exemption for dwellings granted planning permission prior to that date and substantially completed before July 2009.

For the first time ever, new dwellings will be required to have a minimum level of renewable energy sources. This has been set at moderate level and equates to 50% of annual water heating energy consumption. In addition, new dwellings will be required to use energy efficient boilers and where practicable, replacement boilers in existing dwellings, will also have to be energy efficient. Effectively, condenser boilers must be used.

There will be costs associated with the introduction of these new efficiency measures, but these will not necessarily transfer into the cost of a new dwelling. The sale price of a new dwelling is based on a complex set of elements, including site costs, construction costs, level of finish, etc. In addition to direct cost elements, a key consideration is current market conditions, including the extent to which developers are prepared to absorb such additional costs.

Certainly, as the market adjusts to the new specifications, manufacturing processes and opening of supply chains, it is likely that the cost of achieving compliance will fall as adoption of energy saving measures becomes standard practice.

## **Planning and sustainability**

It's hardly news that this country has changed dramatically over the last few decades. We are constantly bombarded by media commentaries on our economic success, our altered lifestyles, our sudden ethnic diversity. It has been said that *'the past is a foreign country'*. The societal and cultural change here has been so rapid and so overwhelming that, to young people growing up in the Ireland of today, even our recent past seems less like a foreign country than an alien planet!

The dizzying speed of change has brought with it significant challenges, particularly in the form of a population increasing at the highest rate across the EU. The change in demographics and settlement patterns has greatly increased demand for housing throughout the country - with consequential pressure on existing infrastructure and the proper expectation of a good quality of life.

In meeting these challenges, 'sustainability' has to be more than a fashionable buzzword.

It must be clear by now that an ever-expanding footprint of our urban areas is simply not sustainable into the future. In line with the National Spatial Strategy and Regional Planning Guidelines, we must aim to provide for high-density residential development in the right locations which are well-serviced in terms of public transport and community facilities and which are built to the highest possible standards.

I will be publishing new Draft Guidelines for Planning Authorities on Residential Density shortly. These guidelines, when finalised, will replace the Department's 1999 Residential Development Guidelines,

building upon the extensive experience gained in the intervening years and reflecting changing economic, social and environmental environments around the country. They will assist planning authorities, developers, architects and designers in delivering quality residential development into the future. Importantly, for the first time, the guidance will address specific issues and considerations for residential development, not only in the larger urban areas but also in small towns and villages.

These guidelines add to and support the considerable work that has been done centrally and locally to plan for projected population levels in a manner that supports the creation of sustainable communities within a high quality living environment. The draft guidelines will be available for consultation for a 12-week period, during which comments and submissions may be made to my Department.

## **Conclusion**

The strong attendance here today, from many disciplines, and from both the public and private sectors, indicates the shared interest in pursuing a vision for Irish housing, grounded in principles of quality and the building of sustainable communities. To repeat what I said at the start of this address - sustainability is essential to long-term success. We need to view the new energy efficiency building regulations as an opportunity not a threat.

I want to conclude by thanking in advance all our speakers and presenters for taking the time to give us the benefit of their knowledge. I wish you all well in your deliberations today.

Thanks