

Tackling the whole-life emissions of the European built environment

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Stephen Richardson, Director of European Regional Network at WorldGBC, looks toward the built environment and its climate impacts across ten European Green Building Councils

World Green Building Council (WorldGBC) has convened ten European Green Building Councils to galvanise climate action in the built environment through national and regional decarbonisation roadmaps – a Europe-wide project called #BuildingLife.

The Green Building Councils spearheading the project are Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and the UK.

Now in its second year having been launched in 2021, the project aims to achieve the mix of private sector action and public policy change necessary to tackle the whole-life carbon impact of buildings.

It focuses not only on the operational emissions of buildings, but also the environmental impact of the manufacturing, transportation, construction, and end-of-life phases of built assets – often called embodied carbon.

Private sector action and public policy change

Tackling these emissions is essential to addressing the total impact of the built environment sector and progressing towards the European Green Deal's aim of a climate-neutral Europe by 2050.

#BuildingLife is accelerating the ambitions of the European Green Deal in the building sector, and creating the first region-wide response to the vision of a net-zero embodied carbon-built environment set out in WorldGBC's 2019 report. The project is creating a pathway for other world regions to follow.

What have WorldGBC and other GBCs done through #BuildingLife?

- Created a roadmap demonstrating how EU buildings policy can adopt whole life carbon targets.
- Supported the expansion of the Net Zero Carbon Buildings Commitment to include whole-life carbon within WorldGBC's global Advancing Net Zero project.
- Established leadership groups on a European and national scale to drive these actions, who will also assist with implementing EU and national whole life carbon roadmaps towards net zero.

- Developed training materials on life cycle assessment and life cycle costing, aligned to the EU's Level(s) Framework of sustainability indicators for buildings
- Kickstarted a communications campaign recruiting Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), policymakers and industry leaders to publicly advocate for a whole life cycle approach.

With over 150 ambassadors from across the value chain, including construction industry leaders and MEPs, #BuildingLife has been growing from strength to strength; and on 24 May 2022, WorldGBC launched the EU Policy Whole Life Carbon Roadmap.

The EU Policy Whole Life Carbon Roadmap

This roadmap is a bold new policy plan for the European Union to accelerate progress on decarbonising buildings and construction, one of the most heavily emitting sectors in the world.

Developed with the support of a coalition of over 35 leading industry bodies, the EU Policy Roadmap is the first of its kind at the EU scale to address the whole-life carbon impact of the built environment across multiple policy routes.

The roadmap proposes a timeline of recommended actions for EU policymakers to accelerate the decarbonisation of buildings by 2050, tackling both CO₂ emissions from their operation and the long-overlooked impact of emissions from materials and construction.

Much of Europe's building stock is old and inefficient, and the European Commission has acknowledged that renovation rates must at least double. WorldGBC's roadmap highlights the urgent need for more ambitious policy and financial support to enable energy-efficient property upgrades.

Alongside this, buildings are still being constructed using carbon-intensive materials and processes, which sustains the high embodied carbon impact of the sector. That's why the roadmap makes a series of recommendations on how EU policy can enforce the calculation and regulation of emissions across the whole life cycle of a building, as well as measures that will improve the circularity of building materials.

A failure to address this whole-life carbon impact of buildings will likely mean the decimation of Europe's remaining carbon budget, putting the EU Green Deal's target of climate neutrality by 2050 and the goals agreed upon by policymakers at COP26 well beyond reach.

Cristina Gamboa, CEO, WorldGBC, said:

“Europe's built environment is responsible for over a third of the region's carbon emissions. Eliminating these emissions means we are fully tackling both the energy efficiency of the buildings themselves and decarbonising the many material supply chains that the sector relies upon.

“We are grateful for the strong support shown by so many leading organisations for the recommendations in this roadmap, and we are calling on the European Commission, Parliament and Council to take note – and take action. The safe and sustainable future of Europe depends upon it.”

#BuildingLife has received funding from the IKEA Foundation and Laudes Foundation as well as from European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the European Climate Foundation.

Find out more about #BuildingLife and how you can get involved as an ambassador for the campaign. You can view the EU Policy Roadmap here and follow us on Twitter @WorldGBC_Europe.

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