



Neutrality Pact

The built environment – offices, houses and other buildings – can be the flagbearers of current efforts to turn Europe into a carbon-neutral economy, reports **Martin Banks**

That was one of the keynote messages to emerge from a high-level conference on how policymakers and industry can join forces in contributing towards what is known as the clean energy transition. The event, in the European Parliament late last month, was organised jointly by the Parliament Magazine and The Concrete Initiative, a project launched by the European Cement Association (CEMBUREAU), the European Federation of Precast Concrete (BIBM), the European Ready-Mix Concrete Organisation (ERMCO) and the European Aggregates Association (UEPG). The annual debate, which attracted over 100 participants, was particularly timely as it was held between two key European Union legislative milestones on energy policy. The first came when in November MEPs in the last Strasbourg plenary overwhelmingly approved the Clean Energy for All Europeans proposals. This package of measures sets a binding 2030 target for renewables (32

percent) and an indicative target on energy efficiency (32.5 percent) that will play a crucial role in meeting the EU's climate goals.

The conference, called “Concrete Dialogue: Pathways towards a carbon-neutral built environment”, also came just ahead of a key European Commission announcement on its vision for a carbon-neutral society by the year 2050. The two-hour debate highlighted the key role the built environment can play in enabling the transition towards a resource- and carbon-efficient Europe by the middle of this century. Several participants pointed out that some 40 per cent of current energy consumption in Europe comes

from homes, offices and other buildings. As buildings are also responsible for 36 per cent of CO₂ emissions in Europe, it was stressed that the more energy-efficient homes and offices are, the better ongoing efforts to tackle the impact of climate change will be.

The event host, Bulgarian EPP MEP Vladimir Urutchev, told the audience, “that while buildings may be the biggest energy consumers they also have vast potential to contribute to a carbon-neutral society”. Opening a lively discussion, Goncalo Sala Leite, president of The Concrete Initiative, stressed the importance of adopting a “life cycle approach” to the built



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President of The
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Sponsored event by

environment and understanding both the risks and opportunities associated with building products, notably cement and concrete, over their entire life cycle. He said that there was “no silver bullet available to make houses and offices carbon-neutral. A concerted and joint effort is needed from all those involved”. Highlighting the “versatility” of concrete as a building material, Leite said that contrary to some claims it was a “highly energy-efficient” product pointing out that it is fully recycled at the end of its life.

Prof Eckart Wurzner, the Mayor of Heidelberg, a German city of 160,000 inhabitants, explained the efforts it had taken to become carbon neutral and how this might inspire other towns and cities in Europe to do the same. He proudly pointed out that between 1993 and 2015, the city had managed to cut energy costs in all its existing buildings by some 62 per cent. Better still, all newly-built houses and offices in Heidelberg were CO₂ free. “It means new buildings in Heidelberg are not harming the climate,” he declared. “Climate changes is bringing about a brutal change in our lives. Ours is a relatively small city but it is an example of what can be done if there is a clear political message which is backed up with action,” he told the event.

No less than 40 per cent of commuters in the city commute by cycle and 100 per cent of rainwater is re-used, he said. In a panel discussion on “building towards decarbonisation”, Josefina Lindblom, a policy officer at the Commission’s environment directorate, spoke about the EU’s voluntary reporting framework “Level(s)” which is designed to improve the sustainability of buildings. She said the initiative provides a common EU approach to the assessment of the environmental



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performance of residential and office buildings. The official started her presentation with some “stark statistics”, telling participants that 50 per cent of all extracted materials are used in buildings; one third of all water is used in buildings and 33 per cent of waste comes from building material waste.

The Level(s) scheme, she said, is designed to improve the sustainability of old and new buildings and a total of 135 test projects have now been rolled out in 20 member states with the final results expected in spring 2020. “It is a great tool and will hopefully be picked up by certification schemes, public authori-

ties and also the EU,” she noted. She agreed with others on the need for “all actors”, including policymakers and industry, to “work together”.

The same message was given by James Drinkwater, Europe director at the World Green Building Council, a network with 50,000 members across 70 countries, who said that while the industry “can be a champion

of the fight against climate change” it was also “critical that the whole value chain work together towards the decarbonisation of the building sector.”

Speaking in a second panel debate on the “whole life performance” of buildings and the need for “clear industry objectives”, UK Socialist MEP Theresa Griffin highlighted the issue of “energy poverty”. The →



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deputy, in an impassioned address, said an estimated 11 per cent of Europeans – more than 54m people – live in energy poverty, adding, “The true figure is likely much higher, given that as many as 80m people live in damp and leaky homes.” She added, “It is clear, therefore, that ambitious action on buildings’ renovation and the recognition of energy efficiency as the first fuel are essential to move people away from energy poverty.” She said, “Energy renovation in buildings in the EU is a win-win for the EU economy as a whole and will help address the issue of energy poverty.”

Another speaker in the same panel, Kjetil Tønning, president of the European Construction Industry Federation (FIEC), highlighted the need to “take full advantage of digitalisation” in striving for more sustainable buildings. Further contribution came from Lieven De Groote, a Belgian architect, who emphasised another recurring theme, that of a life cycle approach to the built environment.

In conclusion, Koen Coppenhelle, chief executive of CEMBUREAU,



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told the packed meeting that access to finance was another crucial factor, particularly when it comes to renovating Europe’s existing building stock. Pointing out that many homes dated back to the last century, he said, “This (access to finance) is a real problem so we have to find new financing models.”

He said that The Concrete Initiative had been launched not merely to promote the merits of cement and concrete but also to foster dialogue on sustainability and energy efficiency in buildings.

“Discussions like the one today are a great opportunity to bring all players together. However, one thing I must stress for policymakers is not to choose

between one building material or product another one. “This,” he argued, “is not the role of the policy-maker, but for the market.”

The Concrete initiative will also organise an event, as part of the European Commission’s EU Industry Days, on Wednesday 6 February. This event, entitled “What can we learn from new trends in the construction sector” will focus on how the concrete and cement sector is evolving its decision-making processes and moving towards digitalisation as part of its strategy to remain competitive while enabling the transition to a low carbon and resources efficient economy.

The discussion will highlight the importance of sustainability to the construction industry and aims to ask contractors about their latest developments and their expectations from suppliers, what new tools engineers and architects are using for design, and how industry can embrace this new potential to tackle the sector’s main challenges and bring multiple benefits along the entire value chain, as well as for Europe and its citizens. ★

Register and find out more about the 6 February event here: <https://www.theconcreteinitiative.eu/newsroom/events/232-eu-industry-days>



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