

PRACTICAL POLICIES FOR A JUST AND RESILIENT BUILT ENVIRONMENT



- ✓ Just transition in renovation and regeneration
- ✓ Affordable housing

- ✓ Skills, jobs, and development
- ✓ Quality materials, reduced carbon, and a circular economy

These policies are endorsed by a partnership of civil society, NGO, and business representatives

INTRODUCTION

The statement that President Ursula von der Leyen seeks to appoint a “Commissioner with direct responsibility for housing” is vitally important and immensely welcome.

While the establishment of a Commissioner with the capacity for real positive change is appreciated, a narrowly defined portfolio that overlooks the broader climate, economic, and social impacts of housing will fall short of its aspirations. Only a portfolio responsible for housing and the built environment can champion the social justice and climate sustainability that Europeans need for real security.

As a coalition of civil society, NGOs, trade unions, local governments, and business representatives, we call for the appointment of a Commissioner for Housing and the Built Environment and stand ready to assist EU institutions and policymakers in ensuring this initiative succeeds.

Europe is facing unprecedented polycrises affecting the built environment in 2024. From the cost of living to Russia’s war in Ukraine, energy poverty, homelessness, climate change, air pollution, and finding an affordable home to live, work, and raise a family in.

The built environment - the homes and infrastructure in which we live, work, educate, and care for our families - is overlooked as one of the keys to unlocking the solutions that will tackle these crises: through practical evolution rather than revolution.

The built environment is one of the EU’s largest economic sectors and one of our biggest employers. The green transition is

projected to create millions of additional jobs by 2030, providing opportunities for many of the 13 million people who are currently unemployed in the EU. All of this while providing homes for millions of Europeans.

Whether new, renovated, or preserved, the EU has the broad capacity base to uphold Europe’s rich architectural traditions while pragmatically investing in the future of our homes and communities. It’s at the heart of Europe’s social cohesion, at the heart of domestic development, and at the heart of economic investment.

Today, responsibility for the built environment is fragmented across multiple Commissioners’ portfolios and institutions across the EU27, such as Internal Market, Cohesion and Reforms, Jobs and Social Rights, Economy, Energy, European Green Deal, Promoting our European Way of Life, and even Equality, preventing a unified and targeted response that is exacerbating the very issues we are trying to solve.

Failure to act will escalate the cycle of rising living costs, homelessness, energy dependency on petrostates, declining quality of life for European residents, democratic distrust, and the barriers to living a life in a home you can call your own.

The EU has a crucial role in ensuring that better homes and buildings lead to a self-reliant, prosperous, and more secure future in Europe.

¹ Eurostat (2024), Unemployment statistics. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-euro-indicators/w/3-02072024-bp#:~:text=Eurostat%20estimates%20that%2013.200%20million,thousand%20in%20the%20euro%20area.>

Practical steps for immediate impact

01

Support the appointment of a Commissioner for Housing that tackles both social and climate issues

02

Call for this office to include responsibilities for the entire Built Environment: securing European climate and social justice

03

Advocate for the policies in this manifesto to be included under the portfolio of the new Commissioner

Though housing and the built environment are not competencies of the European Union, a Commissioner with the power to coordinate investment, regulation, finance, and awareness amongst institutions can address the root cause of many of our crises.

By supporting the creation of a sustainable housing portfolio with a focus on the built environment, Europe both acknowledges the severity of the challenges we face and encourages a response that puts homes and communities at the heart of our strategy and our mission. Appointing a dedicated Commissioner would send a message to citizens at home and to people across the world that Europe is leading the way caring for the future and well-being of the bloc’s families.

A new Commissioner should lead the EU’s efforts to improve access to housing and community infrastructure, promote the use of quality materials and circular economy practices, increase energy security in buildings, and support thriving and sustainable construction sector jobs and SMEs. The Commissioner would also coordinate development funds and private investment to ensure they are going to the right places while celebrating Europe’s architecture and cultural heritage, and ensuring that policies such as the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive are well-implemented by Member States.

Each page provides a breakdown of what the EU is doing now and our best options for policy change across the key themes of (1) Just Transition in Renovation and Regeneration; (2) Affordable Housing; (3) Skills, Jobs and Development; and (4) Quality Materials, Reduced Carbon, and Circular Economy.

These are the pragmatic first steps towards addressing the challenges we face by building high-quality, accessible, and sustainable places to live and work.



JUST TRANSITION IN RENOVATION AND REGENERATION

Improving our inefficient building stock is central to any economy that is prepared to tackle the challenges of climate change, resource scarcity, and rising costs of housing.

There are currently 38 million empty homes in Europe², and we need immediate political direction to repurpose these vacant spaces so that they properly serve the communities they were built for.

By revitalising empty spaces, we can easily increase the availability of housing and community infrastructure, and breathe new life into old buildings: reviving our regions while preserving the cultural heritage of the EU.

With 39% of the EU population living in buildings with rotten window frames or floors³, and 9.3% unable to afford to keep their homes adequately warm in 2022⁴, prioritising renovation and regeneration would reallocate our existing resources - fostering security, wealth, and employment.

What is the EU doing now?

Although competencies associated with development and regeneration are largely national competencies, the EU has the power to foster funds and set the political direction and standards to positively impact key elements of renovation and regeneration.



² Feantsa, Fondation Abbe Pierre (2016), Vacant Real Estate: seizing the opportunity to find affordable housing solutions in Europe. <https://www.feantsa.org/download/filling-vacancies-real-estate-vacancy-in-europe-local-solutions-for-a-global-problem-short-version6570491700181194618.pdf>

³ European Environment Agency (2024), Buildings and construction. <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/topics/in-depth/buildings-and-construction>

⁴ Bellona (2024), Housing in Europe: outlining the problem. <https://eu.bellona.org/2024/02/20/housing-in-europe-outlining-the-problem/>

How can we deliver for Europe?

REGULATION

- ☑ Ensure existing EU sustainable building policy measures are implemented promptly by Member States and tightened appropriately in line with the EU's climate targets for 2030, 2040, and 2050.
- ☑ Promote the adaptability and reversibility of buildings with associated indexes, mandatory life-cycle assessment, and audit for demolition and new construction, especially among city governments.
- ☑ Integrate indoor environmental quality into the renovation rollout of National Building Renovation Plans (NBRP), going beyond air and toxicity only to include passive ventilation, air circulation and compulsory indoor air quality testing.
- ☑ Ensure social safeguards are at the forefront of the EPBD (EU/2024/1275) implementation, in relation to articles 18 and 17 (17-19), with incentives to develop national plans that go beyond these safeguards and protect against evictions and displacement of vulnerable households.
- ☑ Embed nature-positive and circular economy criterion in city-owned land management in the 2023 *EU Green Public Procurement* (GPP) criteria for the design, construction, renovation, demolition, and management of buildings and ensure the GPP obligations are implemented.

FINANCE

- ☑ Consolidate all existing funds for retrofitting, renovation, and decent affordable housing into a single Facility, possibly hosted by the European Investment Bank. The Facility would broaden and streamline access and criteria for funding mechanisms, with a focus on supporting low-income households as a priority. The Facility will receive public oversight to prevent funds being used for human right violations, including evictions as a result of retrofits.
- ☑ Increase the availability of funds for the energy transition through a new *Climate and Just Transformation Fund* in the post-*NextGenerationEU* period, with a dedicated sub-facility for energy savings investments that will sit within the Facility hosted by the European Investment Bank.
- ☑ Earmark a proportional share of the next *Multiannual Financial Framework* (MFF), most notably *Cohesion Policy*, for energy savings and building renovation for low-income households living in the worst-performing stock.

INFORM AND RAISE AWARENESS

- ☑ Review and map the market barriers for financial products needed to help the *Renovation Wave* facilitate a just transition and maintain social cohesion, ensuring that public funding prioritises the most vulnerable citizens.
- ☑ Ensure that guidance is issued with the *EPBD* (EU/2024/1275) on how renovation can improve energy efficiency, indoor air quality and health, and how to renovate with a low carbon footprint, for instance through building renovation passports.
- ☑ Establish methods to streamline, fast-track, and simplify local planning processes for nature-positive initiatives.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Access to affordable housing is one of the most critical issues facing individuals, families, and communities in Europe. We need ambitious measures for European housing that match the scale of the challenge: meeting housing needs within planetary boundaries. Today, 95 million Europeans live at risk of poverty⁵, while at least 895,000 people are experiencing homelessness every day⁶. Across European cities, the average house prices rose by 45% and rents by 18% between 2012-2022, whilst salaries rose only 17%⁷.

There are multiple causes behind the housing crisis. A combination of slow wage growth, financialisation of housing, and the erosion of the social housing stock are major factors.

Inefficiencies in land management and housing supply have left us lagging behind demand in terms of quantity, quality, and affordability. This has exacerbated the housing crisis, affecting tens of millions of Europeans.

Despite being protected by the Pillar of Social Rights, access to adequate housing is still not central to any EU policies and should be considered a fundamental human right. Policymakers have the opportunity to take tangible and practical steps to ensure the right to adequate housing for all, such as affirming the social value of housing and integrating community-led housing into all European strategies and policies.

What is the EU doing now?

The EU has a framing competence and power to set standards and provide a regulatory framework for key components of affordability, such as the energy market, homelessness, social rights, and inclusion in social cohesion policies. This prevents fragmentation between Member States' legislations and plans.



⁵ Eurostat (2023), Living conditions in Europe - poverty and social exclusion. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Living_conditions_in_Europe_-_poverty_and_social_exclusion#:~:text=In%202023%2C%2094.6%20million%20people,21.4%20%25%20of%20the%20EU%20population.

⁶ Feantsa (2023), About Homelessness. <https://www.feantsa.org/en/about-us/faq>

⁷ Eurostat (2022), Rents up by 17%, house prices by 45% since 2010. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20220708-1>

How can we deliver for Europe?

REGULATION

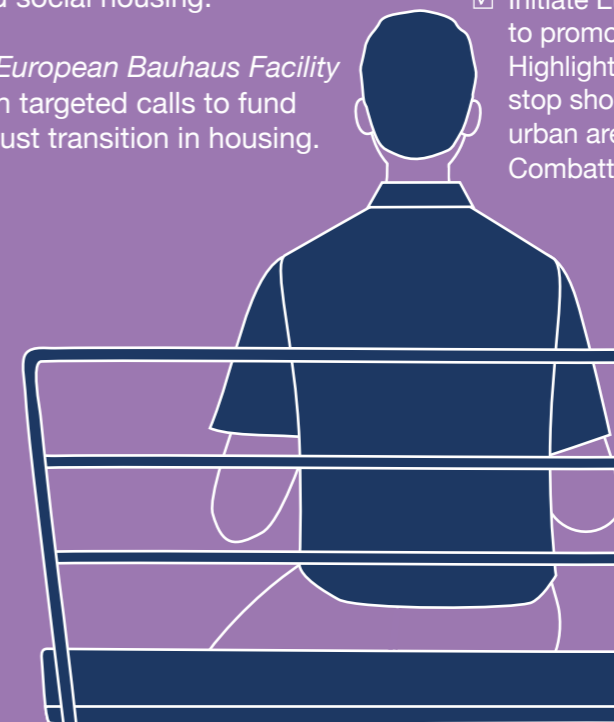
- ☑ Include strengthened social criteria based on human rights standards in the sustainable finance framework including the EU *Taxonomy* (2020/852/EU).
- ☑ Embed social safeguards that ensure the realisation of the right to housing (e.g. climate housing allowances) in the *Just Transition Mechanism*, as well as the national implementation of the EPBD (EU/2024/1275).
- ☑ Support the implementation of the *Social Climate Fund* by 2026 and channel funding from the Fund and the *Emissions Trading System* towards low-income households to carry out renovation work and install sustainable heating systems.

FINANCE

- ☑ Consolidate all existing funds for retrofitting, renovation, and decent affordable housing into one single Facility, possibly hosted by the European Investment Bank. The Facility would broaden and streamline access and criteria for funding mechanisms, with a focus on supporting low-income households as a priority.
- ☑ Recognise, support, and fund community-led, democratic, and collaborative housing solutions, including community land trusts, as legitimate and viable means to provide both market and social housing.
- ☑ Boost the *New European Bauhaus Facility* fund, and launch targeted calls to fund research into a just transition in housing.

INFORM AND RAISE AWARENESS

- ☑ Create an *EU transparency register* for real estate ownership and transactions.
- ☑ Define an affordability criteria at the EU level, and engage in an EU-wide research project to map vacant and underutilised properties and monitor housing affordability across Europe, with the objective of developing guidance on how to preserve affordability at national and local levels.
- ☑ Initiate European awareness-raising campaigns to promote ways to reduce housing costs. Highlight available solutions including one-stop shops, minimum social housing rates in urban areas, and the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness.



SKILLS, JOBS, AND DEVELOPMENT

Today, the construction industry provides 15 million direct jobs and contributes 9% of the EU's GDP⁸. But without adequate action to secure their future, the construction industry will be more negatively impacted than any other sector. There is an urgent risk of skills obsolescence, with more than 3 million workers in need of upskilling by 2030⁹. Additionally, the ageing construction workforce poses a critical risk, requiring millions of new workers by 2035 to replace those retiring.

We cannot build good housing without decent labour conditions for those who build it. Amidst mental health and labour crises, we must strive to do better for European jobs.

A built environment that offers skilled and secure employment is mutually beneficial for the European residents who benefit from this social and economic investment, contributing to the progress of future development across the EU27.

What is the EU doing now?

Labour market regulation and legislation is an EU competence. The EU has a track record of legislation on employment rights and standards, such as the European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS), as well as skills agenda initiatives, and has opportunities to set ambitious standards across Member States.



⁸ European Commission (2024), Construction sector. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-euro-indicators/w/4-18042024-ap>

⁹ Eurofound (2024), Building Back Better: Construction Essential for EU Green Transition. <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/blog/2023/building-back-better-construction-essential-eu-green-transition>

How can we deliver for Europe?

REGULATION

- ☑ Develop construction sector-specific *European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS)* as part of the *Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD)* (2022/2464/EU).
- ☑ Introduce mandatory checks via the *Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD)* (2019/1937/EU) or similar legislation to ensure that the construction value chain acts to prevent human rights abuses and criminal activity.

FINANCE

- ☑ Invest in labour qualifications: train and upskill the construction industry to ensure a just transition for affected workers and enhance employment conditions.
- ☑ Introduce grants and schemes to incentivise underrepresented groups, such as women, to join the construction workforce.

INFORM AND RAISE AWARENESS

- ☑ Launch public information campaigns on the benefits of retraining in professions that benefit the green transition, such as retrofitting and carrying out *Energy Performance Certificates (EPCs)* and *Life Cycle Assessments (LCAs)*.
- ☑ Create an *Expert Group or Task Force* within the Commission or as an independent group, as a mechanism of implementation. This Task Force, ideally including trade union representatives, can provide guidance to companies and all involved parties on legal frameworks and obligations arising from EU legislation.
- ☑ Monitor the territorial impact of training and upskilling of the construction industry to identify regional inequalities and target training in deprived regions with high unemployment rates.

TRAINING
IN PROGRESS

QUALITY MATERIALS, REDUCED CARBON, AND A CIRCULAR ECONOMY

Improving the quality of our materials is better for housing, better for public health, and better for our environment. Currently, the buildings sector is responsible for over a third of European material waste such as concrete, brick, wood, glass, metals and plastic. Worse, the quality of housing and building stock suffers from outdated construction methods and poor quality resourcing resulting in 75% of buildings being energy inefficient.

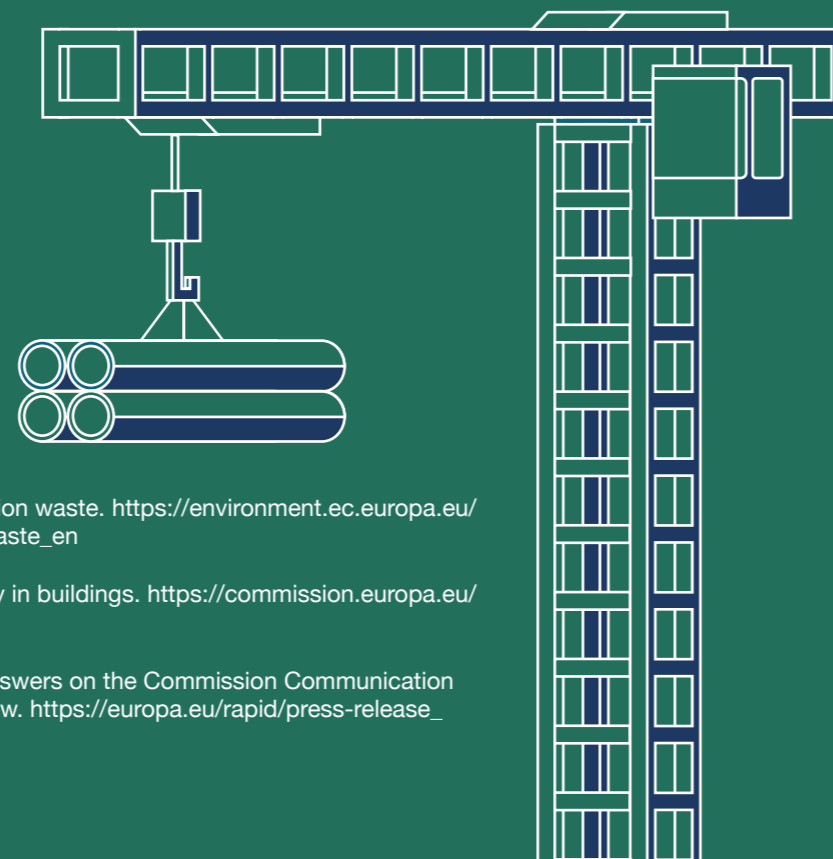
To address this, we need to promote a circular economy around the key principles of eliminating waste and pollution, which reduces greenhouse emissions across the value chain, circulating products and materials, thus retaining their embodied energy, and regenerating nature, hence sequestering carbon in soil and products.

This entails considering the carbon output of a building's whole life, rather than only its emissions from use, or the carbon footprint of a material in isolation. Integrated action on resource efficiency, climate and energy, food and land, will tackle resource scarcity and reduce reliance on foreign imports, while also cutting emissions and biodiversity loss.

Plus, it will drive economic prosperity - by increasing resource productivity by 30% by 2030, we could boost GDP by nearly 1% and create 2 million sustainable jobs in the EU.

What is the EU doing now?

The EU has competence in this area, with a legislative framework currently in place, including the Waste Framework Directive (WFD) (2018/851/EU), and the Construction Products Regulation (CPR) (2011/305/EU), which cover construction waste, landfill, non-hazardous construction, and demolition waste and by-products.



¹⁰ European Commission (2024), Construction and demolition waste. https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/waste-and-recycling/construction-and-demolition-waste_en

¹¹ European Commission (2020), In focus: Energy efficiency in buildings. https://commission.europa.eu/news/focus-energy-efficiency-buildings-2020-02-17_en

¹² European Commissions (2014), Memo Questions and answers on the Commission Communication "Towards a Circular Economy" and the Waste Targets Review. https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-14-450_en.htm

How can we deliver for Europe?

REGULATION

- ☑ Move towards 100% renewable energy sources, by building on *Zero Emissions Buildings* requirements in the *EPBD (EU/2024/1275)*.
- ☑ Introduce a progressive ban on landfilling of non-hazardous construction and demolition waste and by-products, while more critically evaluating their incineration and backfilling in favour of recycling and re-use.
- ☑ Accelerate the rollout of the *Whole Life Carbon (WLC)* approach, and extend it beyond new built only to recognise the climate benefits of renovation. Publishing the *European Commission Whole Life Carbon Roadmap* and outlining a strategy for integrating it into policy revisions and development will be a first step to accelerate the rollout of the WLC approach.
- ☑ Update the EU *Taxonomy (2020/852/EU)* climate change mitigation criteria in the upcoming revision to include *Whole Life Carbon* considerations for new buildings and renovations with properly structured criteria to acknowledge the benefits of renovation measures.
- ☑ Support a quick implementation of the environmental provisions embedded in the new *Construction Product Regulation (2022 recast)* such as the use of *Environmental Product Declarations*.
- ☑ Set a deadline in the *Waste Framework Directive (2023 recast)* for Member States to publish building circularity roadmaps detailing the introduction of national circularity measures and how the sector moves towards a functioning circular ecosystem.

FINANCE

- ☑ Develop a new comprehensive system that tracks and evaluates the investment in materials and infrastructure specifically for the renovation and repurposing of existing buildings.
- ☑ Allocate EU subsidies as financial tools to encourage businesses to engage in the transition to a circular economy, and to help cities and stakeholders develop innovative finance models to scale implementation of circular economy solutions.

¹³ C40 (2022), Clean Construction Accelerator. <https://www.c40.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/C40-Clean-Construction-Accelerator-2022-English.pdf>

INFORM AND RAISE AWARENESS

- ☑ Provide detailed guidance for the buildings sector on implementing circular construction methods in public and private procurement.
- ☑ Provide detailed guidance for local and national authorities to understand the carbon footprint of different types of renovation measures, including encouraging cities to commit to the C40 Clean Construction Accelerator¹³.

Signatories of the Manifesto,

reach out to them to discuss the policy suggestions!



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