

Opening Address by

Mr. Michael Finneran, T.D.,

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to the

Energy Efficiency in Historic Buildings Conference

in the

*Conference Centre, Dublin Castle*

on

Tuesday, 10<sup>th</sup> March 2009

Fellow Deputies, Councillors, Ladies and Gentlemen, I am very pleased to have the opportunity today to give the opening address to the Energy Efficiency in Historic Buildings Conference.

I wish to thank Emmeline Henderson of the Irish Georgian Society for the kind welcome she has extended to me this morning.

On behalf of Minister Gormley and on my own behalf, I welcome you to this Conference. Also, I would like to extend, on your behalf, a warm welcome to those that have travelled from abroad and to thank all today's session Chairs and speakers.

I commend the Irish Georgian Society and its Director Donough Cahill for both proposing this conference and making it a reality. It seems most appropriate to attend a conference about historic buildings in one of Ireland's most historic buildings, Dublin Castle.

Within this building we are in a very contemporary space installed by the Office of Public Works in the mid-1990s. It is an excellent example of what can be achieved, demonstrating how an historic public building can be adapted while retaining its fine historic exterior.

The theme of the conference – energy efficiency in historic buildings – is both practical and topical. As we know, the twin concerns of energy conservation and efficiency have become more relevant as economic and climate change challenges become more pressing. They form part of our increasing concern for savings and cost-effectiveness in all our activities, whether professionally or in our private lives.

The purpose of today's conference is to explore these issues in more detail with speakers from both home and abroad addressing particular aspects of the subject. The range of topics runs from the practical 'how-to' measures that an owner of a historic building can use to improve the thermal efficiency of a property while protecting its character and fabric to the wider context of current policy and research.

An ambitious programme is planned for the day commencing with this first session setting the context of the debate and outlining the legislative framework that is in place.

In this regard, we must strive "*Towards a Sustainable Future*" where issues such as Energy Efficiency are considered as part of planning and achieving Sustainable Communities.

The 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 have focused on the process surrounding the delivery of quality urbanism and sustainable communities. They have also promoted better place-making through the delivery of exemplary practice in Architecture and an improved existing public realm.

In the context of the above and the various policy initiatives over the last 18 months from my Department, the importance of a "*joined-up*"\_approach to the delivery of our built environment is paramount. The first presentation today places an overall context on the Department's approach to quality within the built environment. It addresses areas such as Climate change, Heritage and the Government Policy on Architecture, and the role of Urban Design as a mechanism for the integrated delivery of a Sustainable Built Environment.

Later this morning, three speakers will address different aspects of current research into the performance of existing buildings. In the afternoon, the discussion will turn to the more practical aspects of improving energy efficiency.

Today's conference will not find a solution to every challenge that arises in improving the energy efficiency of historic buildings but hopefully it will advance the debate on a significant issue facing our historic building stock.

It is entirely appropriate in times of decreased economic activity that householders, including owners of historic properties, focus on making improvements to existing buildings. The current economic situation may yet prove to be a strong spur for much broader investment in energy efficiency for all buildings and historic buildings in particular.

**Climate Change** is now well-recognised as one of the greatest challenges facing humanity. Its potential adverse effects, such as rising sea levels and consequent increased risk of flood, threaten not just our quality of life, but also our very survival. If climate change is allowed to continue unchecked, the consequences for humanity and our environment are extremely serious. Recognising

that there is a problem is a first but very important step on the path to addressing the challenge – both as individuals and as a society – but we must go much further.

Following the commitments in the 2007 Programme for Government and the National Climate Change Strategy to take actions to reduce our CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, the Government has taken a number of significant initiatives in relation to buildings. Improved energy efficiency in buildings is a key element in the Government's efforts to reduce the human contribution to the factors that give rise to climate change. It helps to reduce our unsustainable dependency on finite reserves of fossil fuel, a significant contributor to greenhouse gas emissions.

The National Insulation Programme for Economic Recovery unveiled in a joint announcement last month by Ministers John Gormley and Eamon Ryan is a significant energy efficiency initiative. The Home Energy Saving (HES) Scheme is the largest element of the Programme with a budget of €50 million in 2009. This scheme has the potential to support the upgrade of in excess of 27,500 homes in 2009. Sustainable Energy Ireland (SEI) estimates that demand for this scheme could ultimately exceed 100,000 homes.

Homeowners can expect to save up to €700 per year on their energy bills if they install the full suite of measures available under the scheme. The scheme offers grants of up to 40% of the typical cost of energy efficiency upgrade measures, depending on the measure concerned. Some of the eligible measures and fixed grant rates will be attractive to owners of historic heritage properties. For example the contributions of €250 to Roof Insulation, €700 to High Efficiency Boiler with Heating Controls Upgrade and €200 to a Building Energy Rating Assessment.

As part of my remit as Minister of State with responsibility for Housing, I am also concerned with the quality and energy efficiency of the social housing stock. With 120,000 social housing units in the country we have both an opportunity and a responsibility to ensure that these homes are as energy efficient as possible. Thus, and in conjunction with this national insulation programme, we are developing a suite of measures that will review the current state of the stock and promote energy efficiency measures both in existing and new stock. Already, we have received over 20 proposals for

new "demonstration" projects under the Towards Carbon Neutral Fund, and I envisage further support for the retrofitting of insulation in social housing during the year.

My Department has responsibility for the development of building standards legislation, these of course relate to new build. However, in the case of all buildings new or even hundreds of years old, it is the quality of initial design and construction that leads to durability and sustainability and consequently in many cases heritage value.

Principal among the recent building standards legislation has been the new Part L Building Regulations introduced at the end of 2007. The Building Energy Rating System is also an important development for contemporary dwellings - it contains exemptions for historic buildings such as protected structures and places of worship.

Energy efficiency is not something new – but the technology now being applied and the education level of the consumer on the issues mean that we are approaching it with a renewed focus in recent times.

Building design and innovation, throughout history, has always had an eye on energy efficiency – whether it be the development of paned glass, or installation of internal wooden shutters, sash windows or the use of double doors to manage solar gain and internal heating systems. It has always been a concern of anyone renovating or maintaining a building – be that a 12<sup>th</sup> century medieval castle or an 18<sup>th</sup> century Georgian house. This deserves recognition, particularly in relation to historic buildings, where the enthusiasm and commitment of owners has often been driven by innovation, attention to detail, education, passion and last but not least, a significant financial investment.

Much of the current quality and standard of the historic buildings of Ireland is testament to the owners' meticulous maintenance and refurbishment over many years. We should also consider that some of today's modern buildings will be the historic buildings of the future, including what may today be regarded as quite ordinary domestic dwellings.

Since the 1950s, the Irish Georgian Society has played a vital role in advising and supporting owners of historic buildings in the important work of upkeep and conservation. This morning, I pay tribute to their enthusiasm and commitment for over half a century.

The Government has also been active in supporting the conservation of historic buildings by developing an enhanced policy and regulatory framework in this area. Section 482 of the Taxes Consolidation Act, 1997 provides tax relief on expenditure incurred in the maintenance or restoration of buildings that are intrinsically of significant scientific, historical, architectural or aesthetic interest.

The Local Authority Conservation Grant Scheme and the Heritage Council Buildings at Risk Programme are further examples of the targeting of resources to aid in the conservation of the built heritage.

Furthermore, the Department is currently working with Paul Arnold Architects to publish, later this year, a booklet for owners of historic and traditionally-built buildings. This booklet will give advice on the options the owners have, and the steps they can take, to improve the comfort and thermal efficiency of their properties. It will assist them in avoiding unnecessary or misguided alterations to their historic buildings. This booklet will be an important addition to the growing Advice Series of booklets produced by my Department. The Series already includes guidance on the conservation of Windows, Brick, Iron and General Maintenance and future booklets in train are focused on the issues of roof repair and thatch repair, access and places of worship.

This literature significantly expands the advice available in an earlier series of 16 advice leaflets published in the mid-90s.

Conserving our built heritage and conserving energy are not mutually exclusive. Often, constructing a highly energy-efficient new building is considered a more sustainable activity than adapting and upgrading an existing one. However, research has shown that this assumption cannot be universally applied. Our older buildings contain a large amount of embodied energy. They were also built to last. Many of them have endured for centuries and continue to give good service today. This is all quite apart from their cultural significance and the special place many of them occupy in our urban and rural landscapes. Keeping, adapting and reusing our historic building stock is a key element of sustainability.

It cannot be ignored that the level of comfort contemporary society expects from our buildings has changed enormously from that of Georgian and Victorian times.

When these historic buildings were built, there was no electricity and no sanitation or plumbing. Heating was done by means of open fires in every room. It is not unreasonable for the present owners to want to upgrade the energy efficiency of these buildings. Provided this upgrading is made with care and with respect for, and understanding of, the original building, these buildings can continue to play an active role in our everyday lives and also continue as a valuable economic asset.

Many of our older buildings are not capable of reaching modern standards of energy-efficiency and insulation. In fact, imposing an inappropriate solution on a traditionally-built building can have detrimental effects on its performance.

Traditionally-built buildings were designed to 'breathe'. They were usually built of low-energy, soft and flexible materials that absorbed moisture from the atmosphere when conditions were wet and gradually allowed it to evaporate out when drier weather conditions prevailed.

This means that ill-considered attempts to make them 'air-tight' could have unwanted and damaging effects. This is not to say that traditionally-built, historic buildings cannot be upgraded and made more energy efficient. They can. There are measures that can be taken to improve their efficiency.

I trust my contribution will help frame discussions for the Conference and hope that the Conference can contribute and help in delivering on the concept of a "*Sustainable Future*" so that we can overcome the challenges posed by Climate change within our Cities, Town and Villages and "*future-proof*" our existing and contemporary buildings.

I am very pleased to open this conference and I hope it proves to be both an enjoyable and productive event for all.

Thank you.