

PRIORITISE

Resource efficiency

1



KICK START

Circular economy

2



RESTORE

Social and natural infrastructure

3



Building Blocks

a manifesto
to transform the
Built Environment

The Foundations

- A National climate literacy
- B Align the economy with well-being and planetary limits
- C Safeguard future generations
- D Foster climate leadership



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Foreword

Our built environment is a policy area which should be top of the to-do list for the next UK government. It encompasses many hot topics: the need for new homes, the cost of energy bills, the need for a renewable energy infrastructure and nature recovery. As this document sets out, our built environment is responsible for, or influences, around half of key UK environmental impacts.

The Building Blocks manifesto is a call to action for the next UK government, it began as a conversation with politicians and became a full-blown cross-party policy framework, which has had thousands of hours of input from experts in the field and policy makers. This document contains that distilled knowledge in an admirably clear and concise way, drawing on what has been shown to work, taking a holistic view, that considers society and how to address this for a just transition. UK Architects Declare are painting a bold vision for a regenerative and circular future where waste is seen as a valuable asset; nature as integral part of our cities and ecosystems; and there is a bounty of jobs for everyone in the growing low carbon sector, bringing about more social justice and wealth across the nation.

We are the generations alive today that can meaningfully tackle the climate and ecological emergency. As for our built environment, the solutions are all there. In the thirty years that I have been working in the sector, it's gone from experimental eco-villages to mainstream knowledge and best practice. It can be done, it's just a government ambition gap that needs attention right now. I firmly believe that when we've implemented it and look back, we will wonder what all the fuss was about!

Sue Riddlestone OBE,
Chief Executive and Co-founder of Bioregional



Executive Summary for policy makers

UK Architects Declare is a network of over 1,330 signatory practices committed to addressing the climate and biodiversity emergency. It is clear that 30 years of sustainable design has not got us where we need to be, and we are calling for a fundamental shift towards circular and regenerative models.

We urgently require true climate leadership by a government that embraces far-reaching change and implements this at a national scale.

Since Architects Declare's formation in 2019, the construction sector has offered many practical solutions to solve the climate crisis and create a just built environment. However, to have a meaningful long-term impact, this sector-led commitment needs to be supported and accelerated by national policy.

The United Nations concluded in 2022¹ that current policies and pledges do not create a credible pathway to achieving the Paris agreement, and limiting global temperature increase to 1.5°C. The 2023 Climate Change Committee Progress report² highlighted that policy development on this continues to be too slow and their confidence in the UK meeting its 2030 targets and the Sixth Carbon budget³ has decreased in the past year. UK Architects Declare remains hopeful that policies influencing the built environment could play a significant role in re-steering the UK towards a more positive future if brought into immediate effect by the next government.

> 1,330
UK Practices (AD)

> 8,080
Global Practices (BED)

28
Countries (BED)



UK Architects Declare
Climate & Biodiversity
Emergency

Our manifesto aims to turn a **climate catastrophe** into a **climate opportunity**.

£1.3 billion

NHS savings by retrofitting cold homes⁴

£82 billion boost

to UK Gross Value Added through a circular economy⁵

Up to 725,000 jobs

created through low-carbon sector (CCC)⁶

With the scale of the built environment's impact comes a massive opportunity to meaningfully address government climate objectives. Currently:

- 42% of carbon emissions in the UK are controlled or influenced by the built environment⁷.
- 62% of waste⁸ and 50% of material use⁹ results from UK construction industry.
- More than 50% of biodiversity has been lost in UK over the last 50 years¹⁰.

The **Building Blocks manifesto** provides a policy framework for a regenerative built environment that enables society and nature to thrive – creating jobs, improving health, and restoring the natural world.

This document is structured around three building block themes and their foundations:



1 Prioritise resource efficiency

Radically reduce UK's carbon emissions from the built environment by: regulating whole life carbon emissions to align with a science-based net zero trajectory; improving the efficiency of existing homes; and providing tax incentives.



2 Kick start the circular economy

Rapidly transition to a fully circular economy through a nationwide strategy: establishing national material banks; mandating material passports; and prioritising building retention and re-use.



3 Restore social and natural infrastructure

Use people and nature centred urban planning to build resilience and social justice; create infrastructure that supports sustainable lifestyles, green jobs and biodiversity; and restore societal and ecological health.



The Foundations

The Building Blocks must be supported by solid foundations to succeed long-term. This manifesto advocates for action in four foundational areas:

A Provide climate literacy at a national scale.

B Align the economy with wellbeing and planetary limits.

C Safeguard future generations' ability to act.

D Foster climate leadership through reforms and working with local authorities.

1 Prioritise
Resource efficiency

2 Kick-start the
Circular economy

3 Restore
Social & natural infrastructure

The Foundations

Prioritise
Resource efficiency



1

1 Resource efficiency

42% of the UK's emissions are controlled or influenced by the built environment⁴.

These carbon emissions need to be rapidly reduced in order to meet the UK's net zero legally binding targets. Achieving this reduction provides enormous opportunities for the economy, the environment and society as a whole. A national retrofit strategy could result in 500,000 new jobs by 2030 alongside a £309bn boost to the economy¹¹.

Benefits



Achieve Net Zero



Eliminate fuel poverty



Create more jobs



Improve health outcomes

How to reduce carbon emissions from the construction sector

1. Minimise embodied carbon emissions in construction

- Regulate the reporting and limiting of embodied carbon in accordance with the cross-industry policy position paper¹² as follows:
 - In 2024: Policy signalled confirming the dates and interventions below:
 - By 2026: Mandate the measurement and reporting of whole-life carbon emissions for all projects with a gross internal area of more than 1000m² or that create more than 10 dwellings.
 - By 2028: Introduce legal limits on the upfront embodied carbon emissions of such projects, with a view to future revision and tightening as required.

2. Minimise operational carbon emissions from buildings

- Align the Future Homes and Buildings Standards¹³ with science-based trajectories to achieve net zero by 2050 and a 78% reduction by 2035¹⁴. This should include:
 - Alignment with the industry backed metrics and reporting processes of the Net Zero Carbon Buildings Standard¹⁵.
 - Improvements to minimum fabric standards and ventilation (refer to Future Homes Hub report¹⁶ on 'contender specifications').
 - Achieve convergence and agreement of improved standard with Local Authorities who want to go further. Pilot an improved voluntary standard by 2025 and use this to inform the next iteration of the building regulations.
- Reform Building EPC (Energy Performance Certificates) system, to ensure accurate, reliable and trusted performance data. Refer to the EPC action plan¹⁷. Revise Building Regulations to specify accurate 'predictive energy modelling' and 'in-use' data capture.
- Prioritise climate adaptation with proven design solutions.

3. Align all new infrastructure projects with net zero transition

- Review whole life carbon emissions of all proposed UK infrastructure and prevent those that inhibit net zero transition. e.g. refer to the review undertaken by the Welsh government¹⁸.

4. Use our buildings more intensively and efficiently

- Embed a Place Principle¹⁹, similar to Scotland, to encourage better use of public buildings and improve the impact of combined energy, resources and investment. Place-based planning moves away from public buildings with individual uses to multiple complementary functions e.g. a building with a library, GP surgery and Police drop-in centre.

How to reduce carbon emissions from existing buildings

5. Implement nationwide retrofit strategy²⁰

- The retrofit implementation plan should:
 - Accelerate low energy retrofit across the built environment.
 - Increase investment in home retrofit in the region of £64 billion over a decade (refer to UKGBC retrofit investment calculator analysis²¹).
 - Address the employment and skills gap in the retrofit sector.
 - Create robust and simple professional accreditations, and certification.
 - Simplify and streamline the planning process .
 - Incentivise whole house retrofit solutions with grants and campaigns. This should include a mass roll out of fabric upgrades and low carbon technology e.g. insulation, ventilation improvements, heat pumps, smart controls, thermal storage.
 - Ban new and replacement gas boilers by 2030.
 - Set decarbonisation pathway for private and publicly owned buildings for all sectors. Public sector should take the lead and provide exemplars of good retrofit.

How to financially incentivise resource efficiency

6. Reform tax to prioritise resource efficiency by:

- Providing 'Energy Saving Stamp Duty Incentive'²², combined with grants for lower value homes.
- Aligning gas and electricity prices through redistribution of subsidies from the fossil fuel to renewables sector; and decoupling wholesale electricity price from that of gas.
- Creating rising tariffs to tax those who consume the most energy.

Kick-start the **Circular economy**



2

2 Circular economy

The construction industry accounts for 62% of UK waste⁸ and 50% of material use⁹.

The industry must rapidly transition to a circular economy, reducing construction waste and primary resource extraction. This will generate new job opportunities: almost 90,000 new UK jobs²³ were created in the emerging circular economy between 2014-2019. And in turn, this will reduce carbon emissions, environmental degradation and pollution.

Benefits



Reduced waste to landfill



Reduced primary extraction



Boosted economy



More jobs



Reduced pollution

How to **reduce material waste and retain value through reuse**

1. Maximise potential of existing buildings and infrastructure

- Develop a policy hierarchy within the National Planning Policy Framework which ensures building retention is considered first, then reuse of building components, and lastly, deconstruction.
- Take action to bring back into use vacant or underused homes and buildings.

2. Establish a national circular economy strategy

- Mandate pre-demolition material audits and minimum recovery rates as part of National Planning Policy Framework, incentivising re-use over demolition.
- Mandate material passports in both new build and retrofit. Establish National Standards and a system of recording and recovery of materials.
- Establish digital and physical material banks for the resale and reuse of materials, with input from strip out and demolition contractors to rapidly transition their business model.
- Mandate fixed and escalating percentages of material reuse in construction. Allow downcycling only in special circumstances; otherwise all materials to be deconstructed (not demolished) to ensure maximum resale value.
- All buildings to be designed for deconstruction.
- Ensure government procured buildings lead the way by adopting the approaches outlined above to act as catalyst for innovation.

How to **financially incentivise the circular economy**

3. Provide financial incentives and tax reform to support the circular economy

- Rebalance VAT between existing and new construction e.g. removing VAT on refurbishment.
- Increase taxes on short-life products, applying the polluter pays principle²⁴.
- Reduce tax on labour²⁵ relative to taxes on raw material resources in order to adjust balance towards circular production and lower material consumption.
- Accelerate investment and testing for reclaimed and biobased materials e.g. timber and hemp. Prioritise investment and tax breaks to low carbon alternatives where supply is secure and will not lead to an increase in emissions outside the UK.
- Increase tax on second homes and empty properties.

Restore
**Social and natural
infrastructure**



3

3 Social and natural infrastructure

10% of worst-off areas in the UK are least likely to secure government funds to renew social infrastructure²⁶. Simultaneously, the UK has lost over 50% of its biodiversity in the last 50 years²⁷, ranking at the bottom of the G7²⁸.

Urban planning plays a crucial role in solving our public health, wellbeing, and ecological crises, whilst simultaneously unlocking sustainable lifestyles and social justice. The UN recognises the role that sustainable development plays in ending poverty and deprivations, improving health and education, reducing inequality, and delivering growth, whilst positively tackling climate change.

Benefits



Improved climate resilience



Improved air quality



Improved health outcomes



Improved food security



Increased biodiversity

How to ensure a just transition is achieved with new development

1. Develop a nationwide green jobs strategy to ensure just and even distribution across UK

- Develop a green jobs strategy to utilise the construction sector's national reach in job creation. This must include a clear definition of what the government means by 'green jobs' i.e. those which contribute to national climate objectives (to transition away from fossil fuels) and the preservation or restoration of the natural environment.
- Reallocate jobs to accelerate a green transition (e.g. those linked to fossil fuels or carbon intensive construction reallocated to renewable and low carbon sector).
- Follow principles of New Urban Agenda²⁹ by committing to development that is people-centred, protects the planet, and is age- and gender-responsive, so that no-one is left behind, facilitating a 'just transition' away from a fossil-fuel driven economy. Adopt a citizen-led approach and use participatory engagement within land use planning and development.
- Use procurement and funding mechanisms to instil principles of social inclusion, with sanctions to prevent developments that do not comply.

How to reverse biodiversity loss and restore our natural assets

2. Concentrate development on brownfield land or existing urban settlements

- Advocate a 'Compact Regenerative Growth Principle'. Grow communities and their ecologies within their existing urban setting. Prioritise existing communities and augment ecosystems with considered growth and resources, to deliver biodiversity, vitality, and socio-economic opportunities.

3. Implement a national plan to restore and protect natural systems and build climate resilience

- Identify, protect, restore and expand natural assets or regions which provide vital societal benefits such as sequestering carbon, improving air quality, promoting biodiversity, providing water management and flood prevention or moderating urban heat islands.
- Identify regions or 'policy areas' at risk from climate threats (e.g. areas at severe risk to flooding, food and water shortages). Evaluate relative priorities at a national scale and develop regional climate adaptation frameworks to prevent or mitigate risk.
- Identify regions or 'policy areas' of critical natural importance. Assess the role and function of natural assets spanning multiple districts (e.g. rivers or wildlife corridors). Create 'rewilding opportunity areas', considering the Green Belt and the full extent of habitats and migration routes.
- Enable a more responsive planning system using live data sets which accurately and efficiently direct policy and measure its impacts. Decouple the evidence base stage from the Local Plan Review process and enable it to be a more dynamic monitoring tool.
- Rebalance how nature is designated in the planning system in relation to construction.

4. Introduce and extend legislation to protect biodiversity

- Strengthen Biodiversity Net Gain legislation³⁰ to deliver a net gain of 30% from 2026.
- Implement a Law of Ecocide³¹. This is an amendment to the Rome Statute, adding ecocide as a new crime, given that the environment continues to be threatened by severe destruction and deterioration, gravely endangering natural and human systems.
- Introduce a Toxin Tax³² on substances that are deleterious to planetary and personal health.

How to enable sustainable and healthy lifestyles in urban planning

5. Rethink urban planning to make sustainable and healthy lifestyles the norm for all projects

- Understand diversity of needs by creating a national evidence-based framework to implement active travel programmes in towns and cities.
- Adopt a citizen-led approach to creation of neighbourhood plans and focus on interventions to unlock sustainable lifestyles. Neighbourhood plans should:
 - Seek to prevent urban sprawl and car dependency by optimising urban form, density, and low-carbon transport connections.
 - Seek to identify the barriers to walking and cycling, the local needs for amenities or services and the active travel networks between these.
 - Seek to identify climate threats (e.g. heatwaves and flooding) and provide opportunities to support climate resilience.

- Be informed by current data (e.g. LGA Climate Change Programme³³ and local cycling, walking and infrastructure studies), and promote the adoption of successful urban models to embed healthy lifestyles e.g. ‘National Park City’³⁴.

To do this, local authorities need to:

- Work with local communities to assess climate risks and impacts, seeking input from climate experts, ecologists, planning departments, and built environment professionals, in addition to capturing lived experience through citizen assemblies.
- Equip Neighbourhood Planning Groups with greater funding and better access to council resources to undertake an informed analysis and co-develop strategies, alongside climate literacy training.
- Rethink the Green Belt and its strategic potential to address the climate emergency by considering the socio-economic potential of land-use beyond only addressing the housing crisis, and unlocking broader sustainable development:
 - Develop a coordinated approach to waste recycling, food cultivation, water purification, energy production, community building and nature restoration. This should complement the needs of adjacent urban development and natural ecosystems.
 - Establish a unified spatial framework and regulatory alliance for the Green Belt.
 - Create a nationally replicable model and establish a working group representing different cities, and pilot projects across Green Belt areas.

How to enhance health and wellbeing

6. Legislate and measure wellbeing

- Mandate the ‘Wellbeing Guidance for Appraisal’³⁵, using the proxy of Wellbeing-Adjusted Life Years (WALY) approach for all public projects, as set out by the Social Impacts Task Force supplementary guidance to the Green Book, so that all significant construction projects are obliged to measure, monitor and disclose their social impact.
- Introduce a ‘National Wellbeing Measure’³⁶, based on the London Wellbeing and Sustainability Measure, to supplement financial metrics such as GDP and as a tool to understanding how well our social and physical infrastructure is meeting societal needs.

The Foundations



To enable the Building Blocks to succeed long-term, we highlight the foundations upon which they should be built:

A

Provide climate literacy
at a national scale

B

Align the economy with
wellbeing and planetary limits

C

Safeguard future generations'
ability to act

D

Foster climate leadership
through reforms and working with
local authorities

How to ensure solid foundations and long-term success

A Provide climate literacy and training at a national scale

1. Climate literacy should be targeted at four levels:
 - Government and civil service – climate literacy should be mandatory to ensure all future legislation and policy aligns to national climate objectives.
 - University and higher education – climate literacy, including systems thinking, should be taught to ensure newly qualified professionals do not operate in specialist silos.
 - National curriculum – embed climate literacy within education.
 - General public – public information campaign to raise awareness and signpost towards action. The National Dialogue on Climate Action³⁷ in Ireland provides precedent.
 2. Develop tailored apprenticeship and training schemes to address existing and forecast skilled labour shortages in the retrofit and circular reuse of buildings space.
-

B Align the economy with wellbeing and planetary limits

3. UK government to join Wellbeing Economy Government Partnership³⁸ (alongside Scotland and Wales) to prioritise wellbeing over GDP, and adopt the maximisation of planetary health as the primary purpose driving our economy.
 4. Implement a Better Business Act³⁹ to impose a duty to wider stakeholders, including the living world, and to require a clearly stated purpose for the company.
 5. Move towards Doughnut Economics⁴⁰, to utilise the built environment to bring all UK citizens above the social foundation whilst staying within planetary limits.
-

C Safeguard the ability of future generations to act

6. Implement a Wellbeing of Future Generations Act⁴¹, to inform national wellbeing goals and promote long-term decision making (as proposed by Lord Bird⁴² and the UN⁴³).
 7. Implement Future Generations Impact Assessments as a core gateway element of legislation or plan making procedures, which should include how the built environment impacts future existential risks, e.g. biodiversity loss and soil degradation.
 8. Ensure young people are at the table when decisions are taken about their future. This could include youth parliaments and youth-led citizens assemblies.
-

D Implement reforms that foster climate leadership

9. Appoint a Future Generations Minister⁴⁴ empowered to effectively represent the young and unborn in the political process, as successfully implemented in Wales.
10. Mandate the Treasury to implement recommendation from the Climate Change Committee and enforce the Carbon Budget³. First, implement participatory budgeting in all cities to increase accountability and create alignment between financial and carbon planning.
11. Empower Local Authorities to incentivise faster and context driven decarbonisation and nature restoration routes.

Glossary

Circular economy	The circular economy is a model of production and consumption which involves sharing, leasing, reusing, repairing, refurbishing and recycling existing materials and products for as long as possible. In this way, the life cycle of products is extended.
Embodied carbon	Embodied carbon refers to carbon emissions associated with producing materials and building construction. It's estimated from the energy used to extract and transport raw materials as well as emissions from manufacturing processes. The embodied carbon of a building can include all the emissions from the construction materials, the building process, all the fixtures and fittings inside, as well as from deconstructing and disposing of it at the end of its lifetime.
Material bank	Material banks are repositories or stockpiles of valuable materials that might be recovered. If those materials replace primary resources used during the construction, the need for primary resource mining, for example, of rare earth elements, can be reduced or eliminated.
Material passport	Materials passports are electronic data sets that collect characteristics of materials and assemblies, enabling suppliers, designers and users to re-use them at their highest value in a circular supply chain. The availability and relevance of this data, in particular of the use history and reuse potential of a component, facilitates reuse, recycling and biodegradation of that component.
Net Zero	The term net zero means achieving a balance between the carbon emitted into the atmosphere, and the carbon removed from it. This balance – or net zero – will happen when the amount of carbon we add to the atmosphere is no more than the amount removed. In a building context, it means a building's whole life carbon must be zero through either on-site or off-site means.
Operational carbon emissions	Refers to the emissions associated with energy used to operate the building, including heating, hot water, cooling, ventilation, lighting systems, equipment and lifts.
Pre-demolition Audit	A pre-demolition audit is a survey carried out by qualified personnel to determine the quantity of material in a building before its demolition or deconstruction. It helps to identify materials within the building that could be reused or repurposed.
Retrofit	Retrofit refers to any improvement work on an existing building to improve its energy efficiency, making them easier to heat, able to retain that heat for longer, and replacing fossil fuels with renewable energy.
Whole house retrofit	Whole house retrofit describes the "whole house" methodology of approaching retrofit to a domestic property whereby upgrades are done in tandem or in a staged manner; thinking holistically about the upgrades to fabric and building systems (e.g. heat pumps) to avoid any unintended consequences.

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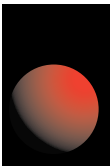
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Architects Declare is a not-for-profit organisation, launched in the UK on 30 May 2019. At the time of publication, it has over 1,300 signatories in the UK. It is part of Built Environment Declares, which is now represented in 28 countries around the world.

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