

# Opinion & Analysis

## Why energy-efficient approach has to start at home



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Cutting energy use in buildings has more potential for reducing carbon emissions than any other sector

**L**ADIES AND Gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. We are now on our final approach to Belfast's Aldergrove airport. Please set your watches back 400 years." An old joke, yes, but with a grain of truth.

Take Sammy Wilson of the Democratic Unionist Party. He is Europe's – and possibly the world's – only minister for the environment who now publicly describes our greatest environmental threat as a con job.

It is a bit like having a minister for agriculture who takes a notion that the fresh milk supply really comes from rabbits, and then bends State policy to reflect his own version of reality.

The DUP Minister grabbed the headlines earlier this week by blocking efforts by his paymaster, the British government, to run an advertising campaign on climate change, which he dismisses as "insidious propaganda". His comments have made him and his government an international laughing stock.

Wilson is to environmentalism what our own Seán FitzPatrick is to prudent financial planning. Take this gem from an interview in December: "I don't care about CO<sub>2</sub> emissions to be quite truthful, because I don't think it's all that important."

Wilson then blustered that he "did not wish for climate change messages to be promoted here", warning ominously that, as Minister, he had the veto on all ecological messages in Northern Ireland. The DUP, it seems, has now added contempt of science to gay bashing as two of its more distinguishing traits.

While the northern part of this island continues its retreat into unreality, there have been some promising signs that the wave of recent economic shocks may at last have roused our own Government into getting its house in order. Or, more specifically, all of our houses.

While houses – both building and buying – have until very recently been the national obsession, precious little thought was given during this orgy of construction to the quality of the stock.

To paraphrase old Ben Dunne, it was a case of stack 'em high and build 'em cheap – and let the poor suckers who bought them worry about how to keep them warm.

In 2007, we spent just €10 million on programmes to improve home insulation and heating systems. In the same year 35 times that amount – €350 million – was paid out in fuel allowances to heat badly designed homes. That's money up the chimney.

**Patching up our leaky old homes is our best investment as we face an uncertain future**

According to an ESRI estimate, as many as 300,000 Irish households may now be experiencing fuel poverty – defined as having to spend over 10 per cent of household income on heating and electricity. Irish householders are now paying an average of €2,000 a year on domestic energy, up 70 per cent on 20 years ago. During the good times, few noticed as energy costs edged upwards. That was then.

As the recession bites, more and more people will struggle with energy bills and fuel costs will, sooner or later, start climbing again. The announcement this week of a €100 million scheme for home insulation in 2009 is a useful start. It's a step away from

the folly of spending money we can ill afford trying to heat rather than remedy badly designed houses.

This, at a stroke, saves fuel, creates thousands of new jobs, cuts our CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and leaves people in cosier, healthier houses.

Set against the huge annual outlay on fuel allowances which, bizarrely, are not means-tested, the aim of upgrading 50,000 homes with an average subsidy of just €2,000 per house seems excessively modest. Still, an inch of insulation is better than a mile of rhetoric.

The average Irish house spews out about eight tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> a year – that's twice the European average. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change *Mitigation Report* states that cutting energy use in buildings has more potential for reducing carbon emissions worldwide than any other sector.

Politically, the Greens are regularly pilloried for being part of an unpopular administration, yet the building regulations they brought into force may well prove to be the most important single legacy of this benighted decade. At a stroke, they mandated 40-60 per cent improvements in building efficiency standards.

We still have a long way to go, but it's

amazing what can be achieved. In Germany, thousands of new homes are being built as "passive houses". They cost a little extra (5-7 per cent) to construct, but from then, cost virtually nothing to light or heat. Ultra-high levels of insulation combined with heat recovery systems mean an entire home can be powered using just the energy to run a hair dryer. Now, in exchange for €7 billion in taxpayers' money, we need to compel our banks to make loans available for home improvements that improve energy ratings.

For most of us, patching up our leaky old homes is our best investment as we face an uncertain future. In my case, as if to coincide with the launch next month of the Home Energy Saving Scheme, the builders are about to start work on upgrading a house that energy-wise is no more efficient today than when it was built in the 1840s.

My own guilty carbon secret is that the house came with a kerosene-burning Aga. By this summer, our collective carbon footprint will have shrunk dramatically as the house is insulated from stem to stern, the much-loved Aga goes to meet its maker and solar panels, a rainwater recovery system and a condensing boiler are installed.

Efficiency, like charity, begins at home.