

SEAI Traditional Homes Pilot Scheme briefing for Cottageologists

Draft 3 by Imogen Bertin 6 Dec 24

We all want cheaper energy and warm, cosy houses. But due to problems with advice being given by some suppliers that could have caused permanent structural damage to buildings, previously SEAI would not give some energy upgrade grants for traditionally constructed houses with solid walls which can be in danger of long-term structural damage from wrong actions. These buildings are about 14% of the Irish housing stock or 250,000 buildings.

SEAI has now launched its Traditional Homes Pilot Scheme.

<https://www.seai.ie/grants/home-energy-grants/one-stop-shop/traditional-homes>

The intention is that the pilot “will provide tailored solutions for your traditional home and the upgrade options include all the technologies available to modern homes; roof insulation, wall insulation, floor insulation, windows & doors, ventilation, renewable heating (heat pumps), solar thermal, solar PV”.

In addition to the grant schemes for all properties, this pilot requires you as homeowner to have a “Traditional Building Professional” (TBP) engaged from the outset of the project. This person must be on one of these three lists AND must have suitable professional indemnity insurance:

[RIAI - List of conservation accredited architects](#)

[Engineer Ireland - List of conservation accredited engineers](#)

[SCSI - List of conservation accredited surveyors](#)

SEAI have also indicated that they would be open to accrediting people with relevant experience not on these lists as TBPs but that procedure is unclear as yet, in part because solicitors may not be happy with a person who does not have the conservation accreditation. There are now some courses (see <https://dasbe.ie/all-programmes/certificate-in-methods-of-energy-renovation-for-traditional-buildings/> and they are planning a Level 8 qualification too). But just completing the course, if you don't already understand houses and building physics or have relevant practical experience, probably wouldn't be enough.

Before you go any further with this, bear in mind that if your house is traditionally constructed, currently you have an exemption under Part L of the building regulations which means you don't have to make changes. Read our guide to Part L for Cottageologists.

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1OJ4sTXIBWo0IA2eLlvVgpdBK5cFeG7s9/view?usp=drive link](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1OJ4sTXIBWo0IA2eLlvVgpdBK5cFeG7s9/view?usp=drive_link) – but the key point is here:

"Section 2.3.7

When undertaking works on, or in connection with, a building that is of architectural or historical interest or permeable traditional construction, the aim should be to improve the building as far as is reasonably practicable. The work should not prejudice the character of the building or increase the risk of long-term deterioration of the building fabric or fittings."

What's New?

The differences with this pilot scheme to the previous exclusion from SEAI grants are:

- Your house has to before the energy retrofit be a B3 BER or worse.
- You have to aim for a B2 BER or be improved by 100 kWh/m²/year, but a lower standard can be accepted, if recommended by the TBP.
- The works proposed must be in accordance with this Built Heritage publication: <https://www.buildingsofireland.ie/app/uploads/2024/05/Improving-Energy-Efficiency-in-Traditional-Buildings-2024.pdf>
- You can use materials without Agrément certification (such as hot lime plaster) which would not normally be allowed by building control regulations but these materials have to be specified by the TBP.
- You don't have to "overspecify" to meet U-values normally required for eg wall insulation if the TBP thinks a "worse" U-value is safer for your building.
- You do still have to have a Retrofit Plan in accordance with EN 16883:2017
- You're strongly advised to get in touch with your local building control officer early on in the process. You MUST contact your conservation officer if your building is a registered protected structure or in an architectural conservation area.
- You MUST use an SEAI One Stop Shop contractor and in the main scheme, these contractors have been criticised for high prices and lack of availability. However they may well just act as "project managers" and subcontract the work to contractors who know about working with traditional construction.
- When the works are completed the TBP must sign off on them.
- Funding for secondary glazing is allowed.
- Only 100 houses will be funded – they can be anywhere in Ireland.
- It's expected that projects will take a year – that makes things very tight if you also will be involved with the Vacant Property Refurbishment schemes. It is likely that in unforeseen circumstances a three-month extension to 15 months will be allowed.

Just as a general rule of thumb, a modern house has an overall heat loss value, calculated from the various U-values of different building materials, of about 25-30 w/m². A fairly recent house that can meet B2 and is suitable for a heat pump will be 50 w/m² or less. A retrofit (even a 70s bungalow) in reality is almost always as bad as 80-100 w/m². My own house was 79 w/m², which when scaled up to the size of the house comes in at 11 kw of heat input required to match the total heat loss. That figure matches our actual energy usage.

See Brian's slides number 6 for more detail on the U-values you have to aim for, at <https://cottageology.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/BrianMcIntyreSEAITraditionalHomesPilotSlides.pdf>

Brian's slide number 7 specifies the likely grant amounts available. However, there is no grant to contribute to the cost of your TBP fees, and it's unclear yet what these are likely to be.

Funding the other two thirds

Typically, One Stop Shop funding only covers about one third of the cost.

There is good news in that you can combine this grant with the Vacant and Derelict Property Refurbishment grants: <https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/housing/housing-grants-and-schemes/local-authority-housing-grants-and-supports/vacant-property-refurbishment-grant/>

There is also a new source of loan finance subsidised by the government:

<https://sbci.gov.ie/products/home-energy-upgrade-loan-scheme>

Remaining problems and uncertainties

- The BER assessors have not been given a training webinar yet although this is hoped for in February 2025.
- The BER assessors are worried about getting involved unless SEAI provides an exemption of no penalties on their work for these projects while they learn.
- It's unclear yet when the building control officers will be trained, probably first half of 2025
- The Vacant Homes Officers have not yet been briefed about new regulations to ensure no EU money is used to fund fossil fuel heating sources and until this briefing takes place there is a lot of confusion on what will be "approved" by which funding body.
- SEAI hope to complete the 100 houses pilot by Easter 2026. That's a very short timescale when there are skill shortages and training gaps and other grants with short timescales too.
- The pilot scheme (and more to the point, BER assessments) do not include using actual U-value measurements (or hygrothermal analysis such as WUFI projections) to guide energy efficiency improvement works that don't risk the building fabric, because this will require a standardisation of the measurement methods to be agreed by the national standards authority NSAI.
- Not all conservation professionals will want to work on these projects. It would be a lot easier if those who are interested indicated this to SEAI in some way...?
- Conservation professionals need to learn more about the work of projects like Fabtrads, because an energy efficiency action that might be suitable in Dublin might not be in the wind-driven rain susceptible areas of the country.

How do I decide about this?

Not upgrading may also be the route you choose if, like many of us, you like having fresh air in your house and want to keep your hearth/woodstove. Part of the BER B2 standard is around the air changes in the house. You are NOT banned from having a stove (open fires would be frowned upon because of the ventilation issue) but it's not going to be funded by any grant.

And another thing that can prove very frustrating to people who love their traditional buildings about BER is... it insists that you design your heating system for a worst-case weather situation based on temperatures at Dublin Airport. Where I live, we rarely need to bring the temperature more than 8°C above the outside temperature to be comfortable. But for BER B2 you must be able to heat your house to 21 degrees (too hot for most people)

at a temperature of -3° outside – that’s a heating capacity of 24°C or three times what I personally need.

However, If you are at the start of a refurbishment, you may be forced to consider an energy efficiency grant despite the Part L exemption. This is because of another EU directive, which does not allow building-related grants to be given except with appropriate energy efficiency measures.

If you are considering going for the Vacant Property (and Derelict Property) refurbishment grants then from 1 January 2025, these cannot include any costs for new fossil fuel or solid fuel heating sources. You are still allowed to replace one that is there in an existing building, but you cannot get a grant for doing it.

This squeeze is going to get tighter. The recent detail on the local authority purchase and renovation loan, for bringing back derelict or uninhabitable homes, specifically insists that the resulting home must meet BER B2:

<https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/housing/owning-a-home/help-with-buying-a-home/local-authority-purchase-and-renovation-loan/>

On the plus side, most of what you have ever heard about heat pumps is wrong. They actually work very well as 24x7 low level heating in traditional construction. And if you want to keep your beloved range like me, you can have it converted to electricity too.

So what’s Cottageology advising then?

- ☐ We don’t have all the information yet. We don’t even know if the Vacant Property Refurbishment grants are being changed for 2025 until the Finance Bill is published. So, sit tight. And the grants typically only cover about one third of the costs.
- ☐ If you are already working with a conservation-accredited professional on your project, talk to them about this pilot Traditional Homes grant scheme so they push SEAI for guidance.
- ☐ If you have been in touch with One Stop Shop contractors before, even if you turned the idea down or they turned you down at that stage, make another enquiry about the pilot scheme which will push them to get guidance from SEAI.
- ☐ If you have a BER assessment for your house, find it and read the report
- ☐ Find your various energy bills for the past year. The bills don’t just tell you what you spent, they tell you how much energy you used in kw/hr units. This gives you a good idea of the heat loss of your house.
- ☐ You don’t have to do this, you have the Part L exemption. Do the right thing for your house and the way you want to live in it, and for your available funds.
- ☐ If you are doing any energy efficiency works yourself as DIY, keep ALL the documentation (what exactly did you do, with what, including photographs, receipts, product information that gives technical information) for any later BER assessment.
- ☐ Write yourself an “if I won the lottery” list of what you could do: Heat pump? Solar panels? Wall insulation? Now cross out all the things that would ruin your house (like PVC windows in my own house)... there are alternatives for many of them, so think about what you want AND what you don’t want.



Disclaimer: This information sheet may include names of people / contractors / suppliers / professionals mentioned on the Cottageology group previously but you *MUST* do your own research! It does not constitute a recommendation.