

Level(s) Specialised article

Group A – Architects and Designers



Level(s) – a sustainable buildings framework for all

Europe at the forefront of the green transition

The EU aims to lead by example on the issues of sustainability, circularity, and zero carbon emissions. Further fuelled by the health and economic effects of the COVID-19 crisis, **2020 is proving to be “the” year for Europe’s green transition.**

The EU Green Deal, launched in December 2019, set out the EU’s climate-neutral ambitions. The new Circular Economy Action Plan, launched in March 2020, sets the agenda for sustainable growth, making the EU economy greener while maintaining its competitiveness and securing new rights for consumers.

In the meantime, the European Commission has launched the Renovation Wave, its strategy for decarbonisation and clean energy systems, and is preparing roadmaps for further sustainability actions like the EU Climate Law and the Sustainable Europe Investment Plan. **And, now, it has officially launched Level(s).**

Any project to create sustainable buildings involves an analysis in depth of all built environment project stages and across the building chain. Architects, designers, manufacturers, engineers, builders, investors, property developers, property managers (not to mention future tenants) – all of them have their own sustainability needs and challenges. All of them have their own contribution to e.g., a building’s carbon footprint, and we cannot modernise or improve buildings without the full participation of all actors in the built environment. With that in mind, **Level(s) is the first-ever European Commission framework for improving the sustainability of buildings, living by the values of flexibility, resource efficiency, and circularity.**

Carbon-neutrality is one of the biggest keywords in EU environmental policy. It is therefore no wonder that buildings and the construction sector are mentioned in the EU Green Deal as one of its areas of action. The Circular Economy Action Plan takes this one step further by mentioning Level(s) as a framework for construction and buildings to increase sustainability, with important implications for areas such as Green Public Procurement.

Level(s) also underpins several actions in another important new European Commission initiative, the Renovation Wave. A refurbished and improved building stock in the EU will have to be based on life cycle thinking and circularity principles and this is where Level(s) can support these actions.

Renovation of both public and private buildings is an essential measure in this context, and has been singled out in the European Green Deal as a key initiative to drive energy and resource efficiency in the sector and deliver on objectives.

“The concept behind the Level(s) framework started to take form once the building sector became a key area of action for the European Commission in terms of resource efficiency and circular economy”, recounts **Kestutis Sadauskas, Director for ENV.B – Circular Economy and Green Growth at the European Commission’s Directorate-General for the Environment (DG ENV)**. *“We realised that, to truly achieve sustainable transformation in the building sector, we need a common language that not only could be used across the building chain, but also help with data comparison across different countries.”*

So how is the Level(s) framework different from other certification schemes or assessment tools?

To start with, Level(s) is not a certification scheme. It does not come with benchmarks. It sets out a methodology for how to work with a limited number of indicators, which together represent the key aspects of a building’s sustainability performance over the life cycle. In this way, it provides a common language, to inspire other initiatives to align themselves with. Level(s) was designed to encourage users to think about the whole life cycle of a building, providing a basis for quantifying, analysing and understanding the life cycle. It goes beyond a building’s service life and value by including elements that happen before and after this stage, also providing indicators for recovery, reuse, and recycling of materials. When using Level(s), the user is sovereign: they choose how to implement Level(s), adapting it to their needs, pace, and understanding of the framework.

A Level(s) journey can start by implementing standard data as an entry point, and later working with more specific data items that even better represent the building project, as familiarity with the framework increases.

Level(s) can be used also for a project not undergoing certification, but which simply wants to start the sustainability journey and wants to reflect on objectives linked to sustainability performance from the beginning of a project and throughout, to understand the impacts of different design options.

Moreover, having been directly involved in the development of the Level(s) methodology, many existing certification schemes are currently looking at how to align themselves with the common language that the Level(s) indicators provide. In this way, Level(s) is also likely to impact certification of buildings.

“The end goal is that, by using Level(s), users are investing in a cost-effective framework that helps them future-proof their building projects in line with circular economy, whole life carbon performance and other green policy goals”, explains Kestutis Sadauskas. *“We know from the Level(s) testing phase that the building sector sees the common language and metrics, and the fact that different stages of the building chain came together to find a common solution, as an important added value of this framework. In a way, we are not just harmonising data and metrics: we are also harmonising the built environment’s vision of a sustainable future.”*

All in all, Level(s) is perfectly placed to help the building sector transition into a sustainable future.

Developing Level(s) – testing phase testimonials from architects and designers

The Level(s) framework started being developed back in 2015 by the European Commission. It started as a great collaboration between a large number of building professionals, and it benefitted from pan-EU knowledge and expertise. The publication of the Level(s) beta version in 2017 marked the beginning of the framework’s testing phase. Between 2017 and 2019, the Level(s) indicators were tested by more

than 130 projects (both residential and non-residential, in new built and renovation) in 21 EU member states.

Among the Level(s) testing and reporting audiences were architects, designers, and chartered surveyors – who were particularly keen to assess Level(s)' added value to sustainability, circularity and quality of life as a tried-and-tested European Commission framework.

"I think Level(s) can help building professionals understand how their decisions have deep impacts on resource management and environmental quality while keeping track of economy and developing architectural quality.", says **Peter Andreas Sattrup, Senior Adviser to the Danish Council of Architects**, who followed the Level(s) testing phase very closely. *"I believe the development team behind Level(s) have listened carefully to the advice from practitioners in the test phase, to get the design of Level(s) right."*

"The Level(s) framework is the outcome of a collaboration between multiple stakeholders" says **Ana Cunha, International Real Estate Director and CSR Director at Deerns Group** (who was involved in the Level(s) testing phase) *"which added value to Levels(s) because it hasn't limited itself just to define a group of indicators, but went further by providing users with all the support elements that make it a valuable, practical, yet ambitious framework for increased sustainability in the marketplace."*

Level(s) can also be a great asset to improve the future of building design. *"Level(s) can be an accelerator for more sustainable buildings and help the member states develop benchmarks and eventually requirements in the building codes."*, explains **Christine Collin, Senior Sustainability Consultant at the architecture and engineering consultancy Ramboll**, who participated in Level(s) testing phase. *"Having a common language will ease the early client dialogue, whereas benchmarks allow for both realistic and ambitious target setting. Once the ambitions are clearly set out, the designers know what to design for, and the contractors know how to build and document it"* adds Christine Collin.

The results and findings from the Level(s) testing phase have been crucial in developing the final version of the Level(s) framework, which will ensure a streamlined assessment and reporting process. It will also facilitate a quicker generation of comparable data, thanks to its provisions for knowledge-sharing across countries, companies, and throughout all stages of a building project.

"It has been fantastic to witness the enthusiasm of the building sector, with companies and authorities from start to end of the building chain, in testing and promoting Level(s) as a reliable, future-proofed framework", remarks Kestutis Sadauskas. *"It bodes well for a sustainable future in the building sector, and for the adoption of Level(s) across Europe now that the final version of the framework has been launched"*.

Getting involved

Following the launch of the Level(s) framework, it is important to spread the word and facilitate access to this framework for all building sector actors, big or small. So, what is the best place to start for those architects and designers wishing to engage with Level(s)?

For Christine Collin, "learn by doing" is the way to start a Level(s) journey: *"Initiate the 'sustainability' talk with your clients based on the Level(s) indicators and simply try it out. To understand any sustainability certification system or a framework like Level(s), it is crucial to get some first-hand experience."*

“To properly dive in and use Level(s), I would strongly recommend stakeholders read the documentation that has been made available online, where you will find valuable insights into what the framework is all about, its key concepts of sustainability, what is expected from different players involved, and about how Level(s) can be used on a building project in its different stages. And I would encourage developers to use one of their current projects to pilot the Level(s) indicators in order to analyse gap in practices” adds Ana Cunha. *“Level(s) is not a certification scheme, but you can clearly use it on different fields: 1) to create awareness amongst your design teams or clients; 2) to improve your design work by challenging your practices and assumptions, 3) but also to facilitate discussions with different stakeholders throughout a building's development, so that the asset responds to European sustainability challenges and ambition.”*

“The combination of assessing design concepts while simulating and measuring performance can be used to document and communicate the power of architectural design if done skilfully – notes Peter Andreas Sattrup. “The Level(s) framework will most likely be integrated in building codes and certification systems across Europe in some way or another in the coming years, so you might as well prepare yourself for the future by checking out Level(s) now!”

Architects and designers can also learn more about Level(s) through the upcoming Level(s) Stakeholder Briefing Sessions. This fully digital series of events was developed to better inform building sector entities about the benefits of Level(s), and to help new users as they begin their Level(s) journey.

The Level(s) framework was officially launched on 15 October 2020. To know more or get involved in this European Commission led framework for sustainable buildings – including the upcoming Level(s) Stakeholder Briefing Sessions - visit https://ec.europa.eu/environment/topics/circular-economy/levels_en or contact Ms. Josefina Lindblom, leading the work on Level(s) at DG ENV, at ENV-LEVELS-TESTING@ec.europa.eu.