

Interiors

Diary of a retrofit: 'It cost €60,000 but the comfort is worth it'

SEAI grants helped transform this three-bed semidetached house in the Tenters in Dublin 8 from a chilly F Ber rating to a cosy A3 home

Joanne Cronin

Hard butter has often been the bane of my existence – and living in a cold house didn't help. For a few blissful months, the butter on the counter would become soft enough to spread easily, but alas, it would sit unspreadable most months.

Extending had been in our plans ever since my partner and I bought our home in Dublin. But, by the start of 2024, we had had enough of hard butter and the constant battle to heat the house.

We knew that our three-bed, semidetached 1922 house came with an F Ber rating. It was built as part of the Fairbrothers' Fields housing scheme, now known as the Tenters, the first tenant purchase project in the Irish Free State. They were high-quality houses built for working-class families who moved out of the horrendous tenements. However, 100 years later, an upgrade was needed.

We prioritised an energy retrofit and sought recommendations from colleagues, leading us to a registered one-stop shop (OSS) with the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI). We had a strong preference for the OSS approach, as neither of us had the appetite to co-ordinate multiple vendors and grant paperwork.

Although we initially intended to get a range of quotations, we found the first OSS very easy to deal with over the few weeks it took to analyse our house and provide a detailed quotation for our 75sq m (807sq ft) house. They clearly outlined all aspects of the works, the cost to us and, most importantly, how much would be covered by available grants.

Our planned schedule of works included pumping the cavity walls, external insulation wrap, windows and doors, radiators and hot water cylinder, a heat pump to replace our gas heating and finally a car charger. All this was projected to drastically increase our Ber rating from F to A3. Our old front porch, which I'd always disliked due to its lack of security, raised a few problems during scoping, but we eventually arrived at a plan to demolish and rebuild.

One spanner in the works quickly emerged, though. The electrical wiring in our house was, in the words of Bon Jovi, living on a prayer. We would need to completely rewire the house before the retrofit could start. I learned that electricians willing to do a full rewire aren't exactly easy to find, but after a few false starts, we finally found a local electrician who was up for the job.

The stars were starting to align, and we kicked off at the end of July 2024. We knew things were going to get dirty, so we boxed up as much as possible and covered the remaining furniture, before moving out for two weeks. The morning we left, a troop of builders and electricians arrived on site at 8am and got straight to work, all the while I



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■ Joanne Cronin at her home with recent exterior SEAI grant-aided improvements. The retrofit cost €60,000 over a series of instalments. PHOTOGRAPH NICK BRADSHAW

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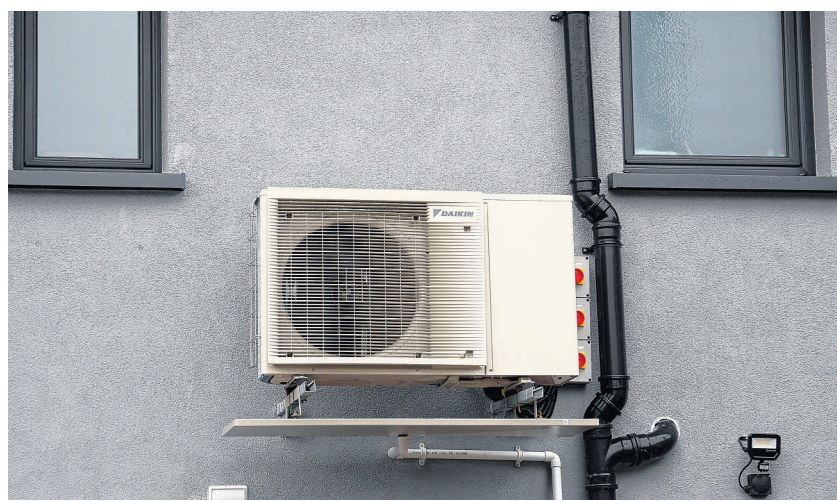
was still thinking about having my breakfast.

The last sight of our house was of two builders merrily demolishing the porch, while the electricians were taking up the upstairs floorboards and chasing channels.

There are some things you just don't need to see.

We returned two weeks later and fair dues to our electrician, he had finished ahead of schedule. Over the course of the following weeks, troops of workers were in and out of the house, much to the delight of the dog. First came the triple-glazed windows and doors, which were completely removed and fitted in just one day, with the detailed finishing taking another two days. It's quite a bizarre sensation to walk through your house with absolutely no windows, but it did temporarily expose the yellow bricks from the local Dolphin's Barn brickworks. I knew that these bricks had been used in the construction of the houses, but I'd never seen them before.

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board, anchoring them with a long bolt into the underlying masonry. Finally, they were ready to 'sand' all the boards and apply the final render. Once the scaffolding came down, we got our first full view of new exterior. The old pebble-dash and red brick detail that is typical of houses in the Tenters was gone, replaced by a fresh, sleek new finish.

As part of the removal of the old gas heating system, we arranged to be disconnected from the gas mains. A work crew and the

teeniest tiniest digger appeared one day, and hey presto, we were disconnected. That was actually quite a big moment as now there was no way back. We were committed to the heat pump.

Inside, all our old radiators were replaced with new efficient models, each individually sized to the room. Our new hot water cylinder and all the associated plumbing was not going to fit into the space vacated in the hot press, so we sacrificed a corner of the smallest bedroom which acts as

our home office. The system automatically switches the flow of hot water between the cylinder and the radiators as required, and it now gurgles away next to me while I'm working from home.

The last major component to be installed was the very heart of the new system, the air-to-water heat pump. It had been decided to mount it on the rear wall of the house, which required the installation of heavy-duty brackets. Eventually it was hoisted into place and hooked up, switches were flicked, and without any ceremony at all we were live.

About three months after starting, there were celebrations when the Ber assessor confirmed that we were now indeed the proud owners of an A3 house. We also received suggestions on how we could further improve to an A2 but, to be honest, I've had enough of building work for now. I'm still finding grit and dust, even though I've cleaned from top to bottom multiple times.

The weather was very mild immediately after finishing, and the only tangible evidence of the new system was the constant supply of hot water and the occasional pulse of heat from the radiators. But we were soon into winter proper, allowing us to really feel the improvement.

The house is constantly warm now (no more hard butter!) and it's just lovely to

walk into the warmth from outside. It's also much quieter as the new windows and insulation help muffle the street noise and the new doors and windows have also increased security.

The retrofit has been a great conversation starter with our neighbours, even though we've lived in the Tenters for more than six years. Only a few houses in the area have had extensive retrofits, so we've had lots of questions and interest, and hopefully have inspired some similar improvements.

For us, selecting a OSS provider was a smart move, as they took responsibility for the entire affair, including sorting all the final snags and handling all interactions with the SEAI. The total cost of the chosen improvements came to €85,000, excluding the porch. Energy grants and credits totalling €24,600, resulting in a final cost of a little over €60,000 (or about €800/sq m). We paid the OSS the €60,000 in a series of instalments, and they claimed the €24,600 from the SEAI.

It has been a big investment, and while it will take a while to see the full impact on energy bills we're already absolutely delighted with the improved comfort. Every evening we sit cozily on our sofa to watch television, no longer needing a heater or blankets to stay warm. Frankly, that's worth every cent.

Dublin 3 €525,000

A-rated rarity on the edge of the city in East Wall

2 Hawthorn Close, East Wall, Dublin 3

Description: Energy-efficient three-bedroom mid-terrace home extends to 100sq m
Agent: Owen Reilly

ALISON GILL

A three-bedroom A-rated house on the edge of Dublin city centre is not something that you see too often. Hawthorn Close was built in 2016 on an infill site in East Wall. The three houses that make up the micro-development have the benefit of being energy efficient, while also being in a mature, established community a short walk from the capital's main streets.

The scheme was built by Ballymestone Properties on the land of a now-demolished end-of-terrace cottage at the back of Hawthorn Avenue. Number 2 has come to the market through Owen Reilly with an asking price of €525,000.

The Dublin 3 site may be small, but the two-storey property has a floor area of 100sq m (1,076sq ft). Once inside the door, the scale of the rooms can be appreciated straight away. The wide hallway has a guest loo, where the washing machine is hidden away in a custom-built unit.

Internal glazed doors allow the light to travel through the rooms on the ground floor. To one side is the livingroom with engineered wooden flooring, and to the other is the kitchen. The kitchen is fully fitted with wall and floor units as well as integrated appliances.

There are three bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs. The main bedroom is large enough to comfortably accommodate a super king-size bed, while the smallest bedroom has been converted into a home office. The attic can be accessed from the landing via a Stira staircase.

Two years ago, the rear garden underwent a makeover, which involved the laying of artificial grass and the building of raised flower beds along the



walls and a patio area at the back.

Number 2's A Ber rating can be attributed to the PV solar panels on the roof and a gas-fired central heating system with zoned heating controls. There is a designated parking space outside the house and the owners have installed a private EV charging point.

The owners have lived in East Wall for more than a decade and have loved the sense of community and diversity in the area. Although there is a bus stop just around the corner on Church Road, they tend to go everywhere on foot, with the city, Clontarf, the IFSC and Point Village all within comfortable walking distance.

Investing in a home at Hawthorn Close may be an interesting prospect for employees of companies with offices nearby, such as Oracle and Virgin Media in Eastpoint Business Park, or PwC and Salesforce on the quays, safe in the knowledge that the commute to work will never be lengthy.