

Low-tech is the answer

Simon Storer, communications and external affairs director of the Construction Products Association believes urgent action is needed to boost the energy efficiency of our current housing stock

Even though the writing has been on the wall for a number of months, during which the cost of a barrel of oil reached nearly \$150, the recent announcement by the energy suppliers that our energy bills are likely to increase by at least another 30 per cent, will have come as a very nasty shock indeed. This enormous hike in energy prices coming on top of other increases, will throw many people, already struggling to pay their bills into financial turmoil and tip many more of our fellow citizens into some sort of fuel poverty. Worryingly, recent government figures estimate that more than 2.5m families in the UK are now living in fuel poverty.

At the same time, we are constantly fed the message that global warming is the biggest threat to mankind that any of us is ever likely to experience. Unless we act immediately to stop temperature increasing on average by more than two degrees, we will be on the brink of a runaway greenhouse effect.

Doomsday scenario

In response to this doomsday scenario, the UK, along with many other nations, has already committed to significantly reducing our CO2 emissions. The British government through the Climate Change Bill has set the target for a 60 per cent emissions reduction from its 1990 levels by the year 2050 and is currently considering whether this target should be increased to an 80 per cent reduction within the same time frame.

There isn't as far as we know a magic bullet that will deliver all that we require. However, there is considerably more that could and should be done that would not only reduce energy usage and thereby reduce emissions, but could also address the misery of fuel poverty.

It does seem absurd that we use central funds to pay for a very expensive resource rather than divert that same money to deliver improvements that will lessen the need to use so much of the resource in the first place.



There are approximately 26m homes in this country and even in a good year when the house building market is buoyant we are only adding around 1 per cent per annum to the total housing stock of the country. Currently domestic housing accounts for about 27 per cent of UK CO2 emissions and yet we all know that the standard and energy efficiency of new build is considerably superior to anything built before 1990 and that is even before we hit zero carbon (whatever that means).

Quite clearly if the government wants to reduce emissions, improving the energy efficiency of existing homes would deliver significant results. This would not only be good for the UK's emissions reduction target, but would also bring significant benefits especially to those currently in fuel poverty, as it would lessen the cost of heating the home.

For many the answer lies in low tech solutions and it is essential that these are installed as the first step. This means ensuring good roof and wall insulation, installing better windows

and doors – double glazed as the minimum standard – and providing an efficient, modern condensing boiler. It is only when these basics are in place that anyone should consider the more high-tech options. High tech may be more eye-catching and more 21st century but, wind turbines, solar panels, photovoltaics and the like should only be considered once the more mundane improvements have been completed.

Inappropriate high-tech

These advanced technologies are extremely important developments, but at times the high-tech solution is inappropriate for an individual dwelling or could only be applied on a scale that is too small to deliver real benefits. Furthermore, the cost of these products mean that the return on investment is not a short-term option for one individual household and would probably be prohibitive for the vast majority.

Government has a very important role to play and must incentivise

people to make improvements. Match funding, better grants or a reduction in the community tax band can all play their part in persuading people to invest in energy efficiency and government should look at other ways to provide incentives. However, they must be the right improvements. The last thing we need is a loss of trust resulting from too many people being persuaded to install expensive equipment which does not deliver the savings expected.

The government needs to deliver some quick wins that will take a hefty chunk out of the emissions reduction target. Improving the existing housing stock will help deliver this but importantly it will provide the impetus for individuals to take a more active role in the part they can play, whilst at the same time removing the threat of fuel poverty from a large number of our fellow citizens. ■

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