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Green Homes Grant: can we find a way forward?

By Simon Storer, Chief Executive of the Insulation Manufacturers Association.

Announced with much fanfare last summer by Chancellor Rishi Sunak, the £2bn Green Homes Grant scheme gives homeowners a £5000 voucher to fund up to two-thirds of the cost of upgrading the thermal performance of their homes. Initially set to run on a limited timescale until March 2021, it has now been extended until March 2022.

The issues

Poor preparation and slow take-up has meant that little more than 20,000 vouchers have been issued. Therefore, at its current rate, it will take 10 years to meet the government's target of improving the energy efficiency of 600,000 homes. Its shaky launch is down to a number of reasons with applicants struggling to secure approval for vouchers, a lack of accredited installers across the country and the bureaucracy and complexity of the application process causing long delays. Sadly, some of the specialist firms that do carry out the work are withdrawing from the scheme as they are not getting paid. Unfortunately, funding available for the firm



Simon Storer, Chief Executive

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Timescale

Why was there such a tight timescale when there was little chance the government was ever going to achieve the 600,000 homes target in such a short period? There was also too much confusion over the scheme and not enough preparatory work being carried out to make it work in the long term. Whilst many homeowners want to get the work done, they simply cannot find the installers locally to do the work and there has been plenty of stories of homeowners finding the nearest approved installer was many miles away and not able to take on the work. Have we not seen a sort of postcode lottery many times before?

Energy audit

The scheme should have greater transparency. Properties need to have a full energy audit as to the remedial work needs to be carried out. It is imperative to employ experienced people who know what they are looking at; who can interpret it correctly and propose the appropriate energy improvement measures in the correct order. Making improvements now which meet the 2050 target will be more cost effective in the long run, but this requires a full energy performance analysis of the property. This audit must outline all necessary improvements, as well as the order in which they should be undertaken, prior to any work beginning.

Installers

There must be more training to put installers in place and a mechanism to identify and capture the number and geographical location of interested customers. Companies need reassurance if they are going to be involved, a longer-term vision from government that makes it worthwhile to employ and train more installers.

Competency

We also need to make sure that whichever work is carried out is done to the right standard. Competency in installation is vital, as a high performing product such as PIR/PUR must be installed correctly to achieve the highest thermal performance available. Once the high-quality building fabric has been achieved it will need no further work and further improvements can be embarked upon on the journey to the 2050 target.

Longer-term strategy

Another crucial consideration is to extend beyond the March 2022 deadline and to incorporate the longer term goals and objectives of Net Zero Carbon by 2050 and all existing homes to be EPC band C by 2035. This latter aim requires 10 million homes a year being refurbished and equates to 3,400 properties a day, every day, every year between 2022 and 2035 – what chance of that when much simpler schemes such as the Green Homes Grant are so obviously flawed?

Summary

The scheme is laudable, but as with so many previous efforts to decarbonise housing and improve our woefully underperforming housing stock, the devil is always in the detail. Remember, we have the materials, technology and knowledge to improve our buildings, but agreeing what needs to be done, how it will be paid for and then confirming that the work has been carried out to a decent standard whilst giving value for money, is the real challenge.

Ultimately a scheme which kickstarts thermal improvements is a good thing and will benefit small builders, installers and homeowners alike, but the long term view really needs to be considered. Meeting our climate change targets is a challenge.

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