



HEATING UP DECARBONISATION EFFORTS



This year many of us have spent more time at home than ever before. With the start of another national lockdown in England, it doesn't look like this is going to change any time soon. We now want our homes to double up as not only our living and sleeping space, but to become our office, pub and restaurant – all while keeping our fingers crossed the Wi-Fi connection doesn't fail. As we head into the dark, cold winter months and put more demands on our homes, the value of a warm home is brought into sharp focus. Charities have already warned that many will see an increase in their energy bills due to the extra time spent at home using heating and appliances. The question is, does this experience reveal any lessons for the future of our homes and heating?

Over 10 years ago in its assessment for meeting the carbon budgets, the Climate Change Committee said an increased uptake of a portfolio of different technologies would develop options for heat decarbonisation in the 2020s. But it said the appropriate path for heat decarbonisation for the 2020s was then uncertain. Fast forward a decade to the present and the optimum pathway remains uncertain. However it is clear that whatever choices are taken there will be significant disruption and costs, and that people need to be put at the heart of decisions driving this change.

Policymakers need to make difficult choices of which technologies to support and decide on mechanisms to incentivise their deployment. The vocal electrification vs. hydrogen debate continues to dominate the discussion in the sector with innovation and trials being developed by both camps. Both show potential. Earlier this year manufacturers revealed prototypes for hydrogen boilers ready for the production line, with other hydrogen appliances for the home being developed. The UK's gas networks continue to lead on hydrogen trials looking at the viability of converting the distribution networks from 100% natural gas to hydrogen. The Government also continues to invest in the deployment of heat networks through the Heat Networks Investment Project. Heat networks already serve around half a million people and have potential to grow significantly in the next decade and ultimately meet as much as 20% of demand. Meanwhile, at the end of September the Government launched the Green Homes Grant in which people can claim significant financial support to help them take the choice to install low-carbon heat options such as biomass boilers and air or ground source

heat pumps. Critics point though to a tight timeframe in which to install measures, and the need to avoid boom and bust installation cycles.

All options have their advantages and disadvantages for the energy system, and the debates will continue, but it is becoming clearer that local planning will have a major role to play in the decisions with the need for the development of local energy plans. The report from the first UK-wide Citizens' Assembly on climate change recommended that options for low-carbon heating included solutions tailored to local areas and households and a greater choice for householders with the need for reliable and clear information. Ultimately, the greatest challenge will be convincing consumers to act when their current heating systems are familiar, reliable, comfortable and relatively low cost. This choice could be closer than some expect with the Government's commitment to no gas boilers in new builds from 2025. This is the start of policies which the Government will need to commit to in order for the UK to reach its carbon emissions target of Net Zero by 2050.

Although public support for tackling climate change has never been higher – with movements spearheaded by Greta Thunberg, and David Attenborough's' widely popular documentaries all moving climate change to the mainstream – many are still unaware of Net Zero and the changes that will be needed to our homes. Research just last week by the Social Market Foundation showed that only 30% of the public correctly understand the meaning of Net Zero, and more than 30% of the public are unfamiliar with alternatives to gas heating. Support to enable people to make the right choices for their homes will be crucial in decarbonising the sector. Government will need to ensure that support is there for all and that throughout any changes – especially those mandated – those in vulnerable circumstances aren't left behind.

This year has already seen the postponement of many things from Taylor Swift concerts, the Summer Olympics, the energy white paper and now COP 26. The pandemic for many may mean a slower pace of life but it is not a time in which our decarbonisation agenda should be slowed, especially not for heat. The pandemic offers the lesson that change and solutions achieved fast if the desire and prioritisation are there. The Green Recovery provides the opportunity for the Government to drive change and start to provide certainty on pathways. Consensus and confidence across the sector must be driven by collaboration with productive and positive discussions. Heat will remain a contentious issue as the second biggest sector of carbon emissions after transport and one the Government and industry must tackle urgently if we are going to meet our Net Zero target by 2050.

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