

West Dorset Environmental Alliance

Improving the Energy efficiency of our housing stock

Requests for action by Chris Loder MP

In its 2019 election manifesto, the Conservative party pledged £9.2bn to improve the energy efficiency of homes, schools and hospitals. The £2bn the Chancellor has allocated for Green Homes grants was part of this initiative. The Chancellor claimed the measures would support 140,000 green jobs, make 650,000 homes more energy efficient and could help slash CO₂ emissions by more than half a megatonne a year, which would be equivalent to taking 270,000 cars off the road.

Approximately one fifth of all UK greenhouse gas emissions are from domestic heating. Our housing stock is one of the leakiest in Europe, and most in need of a wide package of insulation and other efficiency measures. Building new efficient homes with higher standards of insulation is an important step towards improving our housing, but retrofitting existing stock is a more cost-effective way of tackling the inadequate standards of around 12 million homes. So, the £2bn allocation is a welcome stimulus to such action.

The Green Homes voucher scheme

This scheme is an improvement on the previous green homes initiative, which failed due to the need to borrow money for improvements at 7-8% interest, and the difficulties in applying. However the new scheme has a number of flaws :

- There are very few accredited fitters around West Dorset. One of our members applied for insulation to her house, and found the nearest installer was in Wales and would be unlikely to take on work this far from home before next April, when the scheme ends.
- The website calls for three estimates, although only one is strictly necessary. These estimates take several hours to prepare, and many installers are pulling out of the scheme as it is not worth their while if they are merely making up numbers. The scheme needs to make it clear that only one estimate is required.
- Rather than choosing a local installer, householders must go to one of the Trustnet companies which often cost much more and come from some way away. The accreditation requirements for this scheme go beyond those of other grants such as the Renewable Heating Incentive (RHI).
- We have heard that the £2 billion money has now been committed, and that no further applications are being accepted until April. If true, this would imply that 400,000 homes are already in receipt of the grant vouchers, an impressive if slightly unbelievable achievement.
- The measures may create many green jobs. However this scheme does little to provide training for the installers, nor to provide local jobs to smaller businesses.

For the reasons stated above, we believe that many homes in West Dorset which need retrofit will not benefit from the Green Homes scheme before it closes at the end of March.

We urge you to press for the continuation of the Green Homes scheme beyond April 2021, with action taken to train more installers and make it easier for local firms to be involved.

The Renewable Heat Incentive scheme has run for some time, but is due to end in April 2022.

We ask you to campaign to continue this successful scheme beyond that.

Dorset Council

Before the creation of the unitary authority, West Dorset District Council gathered information about houses which needed insulation and other retrofit, and itself took a leading role in stimulating and funding action in this field. We understand from Dorset Council officers that the Council has not inherited information about the number and location of homes which still need such action, which impedes its ability to act in this field. Moreover, we understand that it is considering, but has not yet decided, whether to bid for part of the Green Homes grant, which it might deliver through its Healthy Homes programme.

The benefit of action by Dorset Council would be that it can offer advice as well as supplementary funding, which would particularly help people of low income who cannot afford their own share of the cost and who are not familiar with filling in forms and securing quotations for work.

We ask you to encourage Dorset Council to provide leadership in this field, including urgent research into the homes which need action and direct intervention to support action by householders with low income.

Dorset Council and its predecessor authorities have also been able to stimulate much significant action in the field of cutting greenhouse gas emissions and generating renewable energy through its Low Carbon programme, which was funded through the European Regional Development Fund. These funds are now exhausted, and the Council is waiting for the Government to launch the Shared Prosperity Fund, which will replace the European funding.

We ask you to press for early decision by Government on the scope of the Shared Prosperity Fund.

Listed buildings

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) gives planning authorities the duty to protect listed buildings, and those in conservation areas, from unsightly development. This often goes directly contrary to the need to respond to the climate emergency, for example where the planning authority refuses permission for new double-glazed windows on listed buildings. Many West Dorset towns have large numbers of listed buildings, of which many are in poor repair with little insulation and leaky single-glazed windows. The balance between the need to preserve and the need to cut carbon emissions falls too far in favour of the former.

We urge you to support moves to amend the NPPF to allow historic houses to be sensitively brought up to date.