

Microgeneration Government- Industry Contact Group (MGICG)

Consumer Messaging Workshop

January 2012

A report prepared for the
Energy Efficiency Partnership for Homes

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Event facilitated and report prepared by: SE² Ltd

Background

Communication is an overarching workstream within the Microgeneration Government-Industry Contact Group (MGICG) Action Plan. Its core objective is to coordinate and harmonise the various communication activities with consumers and installers, and ensure that microgeneration technologies, schemes and grants are presented in a consistent, accurate and effective way.

As part of this work, the MGICG convened a workshop for members and other relevant stakeholders to discuss:

- What are the key messages?
- Who should own/manage them?
- How should they be disseminated?
- What are the next steps in making sure consumer messaging is consistent?

The workshop took place on the afternoon of Tuesday 24th January 2012. Another workshop took place in the morning of the same day that looked into warranties for microgeneration technologies which also touched on consumer messaging: this has been reported separately. An attendance list is provided in Appendix 1.

Session 1: Existing Consumer Protection

Before the meeting, delegates were sent a copy of the Energy Saving Trust's 'A Buyer's Guide to Renewable Energy and Low Carbon Technologies'¹ to illustrate the sort of information that consumers currently have access to.

Ian Cuthbert from the Energy Saving Trust added the following comments:

- The Energy Saving Trust guidance is reviewed annually and facts and figures updated. The Guide is being reviewed now, and so the copy of the Guide circulated is 11 ½ months old.
- The Energy Saving Trust aims to tackle the three main barriers to consumer uptake of microgeneration technologies:
 - Funding
 - Understanding
 - Faith in technologies
- There has been a shift in the type of information demanded of the Energy Saving Trust in recent years. Customers want:
 - More detailed information
 - More focus on consumer assurance
 - More information around financial appraisal
- There are also technology specific buyers guides, which also include more information on consumer assurance.²
- Information can date very quickly, especially costs. The Energy Saving Trust is no longer printing hard copies. Advice is mostly web based or through the advice line. The Trust aims to review the figures about every quarter rather than annually.
- FITs and RHPP figures come from Ofgem. Energy saving figures come from technical trials.
- The Energy Saving Trust is working more closely with industry now

The following points were then made by other delegates in response:

- Why are people actually installing microgeneration systems? Are they driven by cost savings, environmental reasons or something else?
 - Energy Saving Trust research suggests that making money is the main driver now that FITs and RHI are in place, followed by insulating against rising fuel costs, then environmental reasons.
 - Take up is usually amongst older, wealthier people – especially those who are about to retire. How can we bring other groups to this market?
 - Improving property value (or a perception that this happens) is also an important driver.
- Is the Energy Saving Trust adequately resourced for any future role in this area?
 - The Energy Saving Trust has no budget for marketing. It has the knowledge/advice but no means of pushing it out.

¹ The guide can be downloaded at [here](#)

² The more detailed technology specific guides can be downloaded [here](#)

Session 2: How can we make consumer messaging better?

Delegates split into three smaller groups to discuss the concerns they had around the way in which we communicate with consumers and what can be done in order to improve it. The themes emerging across the groups are summarised below:

Consistency of data

Issues

- Concerns around consistency of data, frequency of updates and lack of common methodology
- Energy Saving Trust and industry data is not joined up
- Where does the Energy Saving Trust calculation model come from and how does it compare with MCS and SAP etc?
- Independent advice and real life data needs to be more visible
- Laboratory data is used for return on investment (ROI) figures and advertisement stories, which is unrealistic and can lead to mis-selling.

Ideas

- Consistency is needed on performance data: transparency of method and standardised approach
- Actual installation costs need to be fed back from installers to the Energy Saving Trust, to start a virtuous circle from advice to installation to data to better advice.
- Need a trusted website
- Need to present information in different ways (e.g. Energy Saving Trust, MCS, REAL, local authority, DECC, community groups, national networks (pensioners, eco groups) – some want to see figures, some rather pictures/videos of what installations look like)

Basic understanding of costs

Issues

- Unfamiliar technologies as not many people have them yet
- People are making financial decisions based FiTs/RHI but there are a lot of uncertainties
- Public confidence has been knocked by the FiTs setback
- How does consumer know the rate of return is good for them?
- Uncertainty over whether modelling of savings/costs are suitable to customer's properties

Ideas

- Expensive technology so need to trust it will work: lease models, simple assurance models
- PR exercise to provide confidence for consumers
- We need to get RHI right: need to make it worthwhile to install heat technology rather than new boiler - therefore economics need to work.
- Any Green Deal advice needs to talk about RHI and FiTs and how they fit in with Green Deal finance – there is real confusion about this. This needs to be personalized, accessible and put out at right time: all tenures, domestic and non-domestic, different built-form

Present information in different ways

Issues

- Information very complex
- People take in information in different ways.
- Industry not necessarily the best at people to get the information out.

Ideas

- Communication rather than technical expertise

Getting independent advice

Issues

- Installers often deliver advice – but they have vested interests
- Independent advice can be the second port of call after initial research
- Concerns about misinformation from unreliable sources, especially ‘free solar’ offers.
- How do we ensure that consumers are pointed to the right information?

Ideas

- Create a lattice of websites – all linked so consumers can easily click through for independent information. E.g. Energy Saving Trust, Trustmark, Citizens Advice, Age UK, local authorities, housing associations

Getting information too late

Issues

- People are reading advice after they’ve already made decisions / purchased
- Some people are not getting the information in the first place
- Awareness needs to be raised generally

Ideas

- Co-ordinated nation-wide awareness campaign on Green Deal, providing independent advice and funded by pooled contributions from across industry
- Are there opportunities to advertise through BBC if it’s an independent campaign supported by Government?
- Links to redecoration programmes (e.g. Changing Rooms)

Finding a good installer

Issues

- Rating websites are unreliable and searching by postcode only is too crude

Ideas

- Databases of installers are on MCS and REAL websites – can we check how many other websites link to these?
- Consumers value feedback from people who are similar to them (e.g. tripadvisor): word of mouth from people what already installed is really valuable, but again need to ensure companies are not promoting themselves or buying good ratings

- A non-commercial, independent body (e.g. Energy Saving Trust, Trustmark) could collect genuine feedback on installations, using warranty numbers to check that the installation is genuine

Pressure selling

Issues

- People are misled or sign contract under pressure
- Particularly a problem for elderly people / people living alone who don't use the internet.
- Cooling off periods may be too short in this case as it may be a few days before advice is sought.

Ideas

- Advice from local community groups – especially to vulnerable consumers

Confusing assurance brands

Issues

- Difficult to explain MCS and REAL: Green Deal assurance could add to the problem

Ideas

- Single intuitive assurance brand or module under Green Deal assurance umbrella

How to get best from system

Issues

- People not advised how to get the best out of the system
- Not using appliances at most beneficial time.
- Not installing energy efficiency measures or choosing energy efficiency appliances

Ideas

- Householders need to be shown how to optimise performance throughout the lifetime of the system – but not through a ton of documentation in 15 languages.
- Requirements on installers to provide information about running the system (commissioning).
- Requirement on new-build developers to provide advice on use across technologies.
- Option of performance monitoring.
- Consumers must own their own data through smart metering system and have access to it for free, to enable energy services that can assist with performance monitoring.

Planning ahead / distress purchases

Issues

- People want heating – will only consider change if a) summer or b) open and ready to change.

Ideas

- Communication around planning ahead and comparing repair fossil fuel vs replace with renewable heat.

Value of FIT in EPC

Issues

- Value of microgeneration technologies not included in RdSAP / EPC calculations, and therefore look very expensive with little / no return

Ideas

- Include FiT in EPC calculations
- Needs to be presented to potential buyers/tenants

Heat pump information

Issues

- Information about air-source and ground-source heat pumps is lumped together in the Energy Saving Trust guide. Recognise though that space is an issue – and we need to make things as straightforward as possible
- Installers give conflicting advice
- Need to recognise that heat pumps (and biomass) are understood less well than other technologies (e.g. solar)

Ideas

- Need to clearly state the pros and cons of each, and how they could work for different types of properties

Grid connection

Issues

- There's an ignorance of issues (e.g. at what point do grid connection costs jump up as expensive grid reinforcement measures become necessary)

Ideas

- Socialise the costs (i.e. spread the cost of grid connection locally, rather than the last person on the connection bearing the whole cost). This would be difficult to manage though
- Develop a grid capacity map / database – though this could be misleading if it doesn't cover planned as well as existing use.

Other considerations

The groups were also asked to make a note of any positive feedback on the Energy Saving Trust guide, thoughts on communication routes and comments on the Green Deal Guide for consumers that is currently being compiled.

Positive points about the Energy Saving Trust guide

- Independence (i.e. unbiased/impartial) – this is a very important principle/aspiration.
- Good range of material re: technologies
- Language is consumer friendly but general awareness raising may need to be simple. This guide already suits those with some knowledge/awareness

Communication routes

- Neighbourhoods / communities
- Home renewable advisors (Scotland)
- Online - needs interactivity. Could it be placed within a broader information package for householders, funded by other industries (e.g. based around home/street) set within something broader than just a Green Deal website? Could be a revenue generation mechanism with other businesses advertising/contributing.

Green Deal Consumer Guide

- Can leaflet be about signposting to more detailed guides (e.g. Energy Saving Trust ones). Primary leaflets needs to grab attention; secondary information needs to anticipate more detailed questions.
- Buyers Guide needs to be shortened if it's to be incorporated in the Green Deal guide
- Consumers need a step-by-step project management guide e.g. checklist, what steps do you take to reach a sensible decision?
- Think about who are other commercial providers you can bring in?
 - Wrap Green Deal advice services within other platforms
 - Inserts within energy bills?
 - High street brands if M&S and B&Q are going to be providers.

Session 3: Action Planning

The final session focused on three of the themes that emerged in Session 2 and began to plan out what needs to happen next to start to tackle the issue.

Updating data

- Technology-specific cost data
 - Role for manufacturers, Energy Saving Trust, installers, REAL, trade bodies, consumers
 - Quote as percentage of boiler costs (including RHI and FiTs cost to make it competitive)
 - Aim towards real time data: annual data is too infrequent
 - Need to find and approve data sources
 - Compare regionally? – move away from blanket costs from across the UK
- Savings and income
 - Role for BRE, Energy Saving Trust, MCS, manufacturers, consumers
 - Issues with biomass savings
 - SAP vs field trials
 - Many variables (occupancy, hot water storage sizing, fuel displaced, etc)
 - Calculation CoPs
 - Question marks over RHI and lack of clarity over long term FiTs – quotes are using figures that might be wrong
- Tools
 - Same organisations as above
 - Different tools are giving different results (e.g. NOABL, Carbon Trust, Energy Saving Trust, SAP).
 - Does it matter as long as everyone knows how they are different? Makes more work for the consumer
- **Next steps:**
 - Set up small subject specific groups to make sure there is consistency and transparency about how things are calculated. This group can then sign off the data.
 - The Minister wants a dashboard system with neutral data on average weekly costs etc.
 - People could register real time data when they register a job on the MCS database.

Lattice of websites

- Identify the starting point – how to consumers start looking for information online?
 - Use key words / common terms to search for what is already out there
- Build the lattice / web
 - Start with the Energy Saving Trust at the centre of the web
 - Close links to DECC, local authorities, Building Regs
- Promote all MCS installers / manufacturers to link to website – button on their site?
 - Utilise industry contacts
 - But installers will want customers to stay on their site, not be directed away: needs some backward value for them
 - Embed content on their website? But would need to be frequently updated
- Meet / contact organisations that could form spokes
 - List of MCS installers should be available on 'end point' website (Energy Saving Trust)

- Frequent use would mean Energy Saving Trust would float to the top of Google searches
- **Next steps:**
 - Research what is currently available online
 - Circulate a one-pager about this to the rest of MGICG

Presenting information in different ways

- Need to understand target audience and how they take information in best
 - Honest information: pros and cons and things to be aware of
 - Give consumers the opportunity to say how they would like to receive information
 - Understand behavioural pulls – is it all about money?
 - Understanding the demographic – targeting groups: is it really affluent 60+ or not? What role do secondary school / college students have in telling their parents? Community schemes (e.g. schools, churches) could work as multiplier to give real-life experience
 - Where does industry fit?
- Work with consumer behaviour experts / focus groups
- How does industry fund this?
 - Need to have this discussion early on
 - MCS marketing plan and budget
 - Trade associations
 - Can industry and government share the burden?
 - Questions about funding need to go back to MGICG
- **Next steps:**
 - Talk to existing groups (Energy Saving Trust, Consumer Focus, Futerra) and pool the understanding around consumer research.
 - Need to check how old this research is, especially re incentives.

Final comments

As the workshop drew to a close, delegates re-iterated the point that all the information and advice is already out there, the main issue is how to convey it. Independently verified case studies can also be very powerful.

Appendix 1: Attendees

Organisation	First Name	Surname
[independent]	Bruce	Young
BondPay	Nick	Egdell
CAG Consultants	Denny	Gray
Chimera	Vince	Linnane
CIBSE	Jacquelyn	Fox
CIPHE	Keith	Westcott
Consumer Focus	Liz	Lainé
DECC	Hannah	Lewis
Energy Saving Trust	Ian	Cuthbert
Gemserv	Brendan	McGarry
HETAS	Alun	Williams
MCS	Gideon	Richards
Micropower Council	Grace	Bennett
NHBC	Neil	Smith
REA	Mike	Landy
REAL Assurance	Sue	Bloomfield
REIGA	Nigel	Poole
Trustmark	Roman	Russocki
EEPH (chair)	Mark	Brown
EEPH (event coordination)	Mathias	Hessler

The event was facilitated by Rachael Mills and Chloe McLaren Webb of SE² Ltd.