

Energy Saving Trust's response to Ofgem's consultation on the administration of the Boiler Upgrade Scheme

Submitted January 2022

1. Do you agree or disagree with the proposed approach to evidencing existing heating systems? If you disagree, please say why.

We broadly agree with the approach. We would encourage that the burden of evidence gathering placed on installers is limited and would suggest a simple checklist to use, to make the process as easy as possible to save administration work, and remove overly complex procedures on proof (e.g., Section 2.1 on page 13 states that 'Installers will need to submit supporting evidence.'). Some of the evidence proofs required could be secured directly by Ofgem, like EPC certificates, and a request that homeowners upload this on a customer portal would ease the burden of proofs required.

It is worth noting that the Product Eligibility List (PEL) has historically been populated by the MCS Installations Database (MID). This means that an MCS certified installer can only select MCS certified products, which eventually appear on an installation certificate. MCS advise checking the proposed PEL and that it reflects the MCS certified products in the MID and is not different to allow certification of the installation.

We also note that in the future, the evidencing process might be linked to the Government's proposed market-based mechanism for low-carbon heat, in order to streamline evidence collection.

Following the Green Homes Grant, the Energy Efficiency Infrastructure Group (EEIG) set out lessons which should be taken forward for future grant schemes, available here: https://www.theeeig.co.uk/media/1107/eeig_learning_lessons_green_homes_grant.pdf

These are complementary to the assessment undertaken by the National Audit Office: <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/green-homes-grant/>

2. Do you agree or disagree with installers being the party to provide evidence to Ofgem regarding custom-build properties? If you disagree, please say why.

We agree with the inclusion of custom-build-properties in the scheme, which are single build properties owned by individuals (not companies), with installers providing evidence to Ofgem for these types of properties. We recommend a simple, quick and easy to use assessment form for an installer to use to reduce the burden of proof and paperwork

required. There should also be an option for homeowners to share certain documents with Ofgem directly through a consumer portal. It may also be useful for installers to have access to this portal.

3. Is there any other evidence we should request to prove that properties are custom-build?

Any processes for evidence gathering for installers should be simple so the scheme easier to administer, and not to be time consuming for installers to use or households to evidence. For example, it could be useful if Ofgem produced a help sheet on the property types to share with installers, similar to ones used for DRHI - https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/sites/default/files/docs/2016/04/drhi_factsheet_custombuild_v2_0_mar_2016_web.pdf

There should be a simple self-declaration form for the custom-builder or individual to the installer with address and contact details which could be cross referenced on the Ofgem database. New build property owners may be uncomfortable sharing certain personal information with installers, such as title deeds, DIY VAT refund from HMRC or invoices.

To place a burden on installers to gather this information could be time consuming and any delays from the custom builders/owners could lead to delays in payments or voucher redemption for the installer. A simple self-declaration process signed by the custom builder which is then provided to the installer could be a more streamlined approach. Under the DRHI, personal information was being provided to a Government department on a Government website, rather than to an installer.

The ambition for the BUS should be to create a simple to use, fast system, that does not leave installers vulnerable or create overly complex burdens of proof that installers are required to supply to Ofgem.

4. Do you agree or disagree with the proposed approach to evidencing that a property is not social housing? If you disagree, please say why.

We encourage the option of a self-declaration form from the property owner as to the status and requirements of the property which they could upload to a consumer portal, to help lower the burden of evidence and potential liability placed on the installer.

5. Do you agree or disagree with the proposal to use an API to access the information we need from a property's EPC? If you disagree, please provide alternative suggestions, including any evidence, to support your response.

Using an API to access the EPC information would be quicker and easier as opposed to a homeowner/installer having to manually share the EPC document with Ofgem. There is a

risk that improvements to properties may have been made since the last EPC assessment was conducted. This could lead to properties being excluded from the scheme, when they now qualify. It would be useful to provide property owners with a chance to have a new EPC or to provide additional evidence that since the last EPC.

Through our own work we have had issues with the format of the data, especially for older EPCs with our own API. It is challenging to pull out all the data that is needed and installers will still have to build on this with occupancy data. This will work for some properties but not all. Because of this it will be important to have an alternative approach.

If remedial work has occurred since the last rating assessment, homeowners could provide other documents to evidence they now have insulation in place e.g., invoice with property address and date, showing improvements made after the last EPC assessment.

We also note the broader challenges associated with the accuracy of EPCs which can undermine their ability to provide the correct level of information required to efficiently install a heat pump and encourage continued improvements to be made and reflected from the EPC Action Plan.

6. Do you agree or disagree with the approach to administering insulation exemptions? If you disagree, please say why.

We agree with the general approach. However, the consultation document says that applications may be made for properties which have loft or cavity wall insulation recommendations, as long as the insulation is installed before the voucher is redeemed. However, if there is a delay and insulation is not installed prior to commissioning or there are difficulties in booking an EPC assessment, it could mean that voucher redemptions are delayed and they could fall out of the three-month window (which is very short for these supply chain issues) for an Air Source Heat Pump voucher redemption period. Such delays could result in installers not being paid in a timely fashion for works completed in good faith. Timely payment issues was a key criticism of the Green Homes Grant voucher scheme (GHGVS).

7. Is there any other evidence that Ofgem should consider when determining the eligibility of a low carbon heating system?

We support the requirement of clear criteria for low carbon heating systems, and highlight the need for MCS Certification and for the relevant equipment to be listed on the Product Eligibility List (PEL), which should reflect the MCS MID. Lessons should also be learnt from previous schemes such as the GHGVS, in which the application 'Sightline' where installers were required to provide evidence on the installation was difficult to use and many installers experienced technical issues.

8. Do you agree or disagree with our proposed approach to evidencing whether a property is connected to the gas grid? If you disagree, please provide alternative suggestions, including any evidence, to support your response.

In the Consultation, there is a requirement for installers to submit supporting evidence to Ofgem as part of their application, to demonstrate that a property is connected to the gas grid. A simple tick box on a form would be sufficient to confirm the property is connected to the gas grid, and the property owner could provide evidence of a gas connection (gas meter or previous bill) to the installer as proof.

9. Do you agree or disagree with our proposed approach to evidencing whether properties are in a rural area? If you disagree, please provide alternative suggestions, including any evidence, to support your response.

We agree with the proposal to use the ONS tool.

10. Do you agree or disagree with our classification of parts that can and cannot be used before the heating system is first commissioned? If you disagree, please say why.

We agree that heating units should be new, in line with the MCS-001 Standard which specifies that products and materials installed shall be new and not previously used (https://mcscertified.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/MCS-001-1-Issue-4.2_Final.pdf)

11. Do you agree that the 'authorised signatory' for business accounts should be an individual with legal authority to represent the organisation e.g. a Director, Chief Operating Officer, Chief Executive Officer or Company Secretary? If you disagree, please provide alternative suggestions, including any evidence, to support your response.

Yes. The signatory should be at Company Secretary, Director level or above and that additional users can be set up for an account. The 'authorized signature' system also needs to be flexible enough to recognise sole traders or other structures that small businesses may have.

12. Do you agree or disagree with the proposed sets of user permissions? If you disagree, please provide alternative suggestions, including any evidence, to support your response.

We agree with the user permissions as outlined in the consultation. As stated in the consultation, users granted voucher application permissions will have the ability to submit new voucher applications, edit existing applications and respond to queries in respect of submitted applications. They will also be able to reapply if a voucher expires, cancel an application/voucher and redeem an issued voucher on commissioning of an installation. Users granted user management permission will have the ability to add and

remove additional users from the account. They will also be able to set permissions for new users and update permissions for existing users. Those who are granted account management permissions will have the ability to update key information about the company, e.g. bank details, MCS number, business address.

13. Should we collect other information contained on the quote for the purposes of assurance that the property owner has been consulted and reducing speculative applications?

A simple one-page checklist form confirming eligibility for the property and a name address, postcode and signature for the homeowner and the installer should be sufficient proof as to the consultation process and assurance from the homeowner about a voucher application. Ofgem should consider whether a digital signature can be provided. There should be contact details to check information. We would also recommend that Ofgem introduces some kind of random checks to prevent fraud.

14. Do you agree or disagree with the proposed approach to obtaining evidence of property owner consent? If you disagree, please say why.

We agree with consent and a simple signature from the homeowner, with name, address and postcode as a confirmation process. We also think this should include a statement on ownership of the system and responsibility for maintenance costs. The Domestic Renewable Heat Incentive (DRHI) required title deeds, DIY VAT refund from HMRC or invoices. There may be reluctance to provide certain personal information, VAT receipts, title deeds or HMRC invoices with installers. There are also data protection and GDPR issues on data being passed to an installer and then on to a third party e.g., Ofgem and if appropriate permissions and consent forms are part of the process. Therefore, a consumer portal could play a useful role in the Voucher application process for consumers to upload and provide such evidence directly to Ofgem.

15. Do you agree or disagree with the 7-day period for property owners to provide consent? If you disagree, please say why.

While an installer is visiting the property and making an assessment, it would be more streamlined to gain owner consent at this point in the process, to limit the time taken during the application process and reduce the follow up time required by installers. It would be useful for Ofgem to confirm if digital consent can be given. In the consultation, Ofgem intend to make a payment to the installer for the amount associated with the redeemed voucher within a week of the notification that the application has been successful. It should be made clearer whether a week refers to 5 working days.

16. Is there any additional information that you think should be included in the boiler upgrade voucher notification?

In the consultation, Ofgem will be required to determine grant applications in the order they are received and will not be able to issue a BUS voucher if doing so would exceed the budget allocation for that financial year (or that quarter if a quarterly budget allocation is in place). There could be issues with over-subscription for vouchers and related payments, as this is a three-year scheme with BEIS and the Treasury confirming that only £150 million will be allocated each year for the three-year scheme duration. Ofgem should consider building in some over allocation for drop off.

There should be clear communication and forecasts of when the funding allocation limit will be reached. If the annual funding allocation is reached before the end of a financial year, those applications received after the funding allocation has been reached should be carried over to the following financial year.

It is worth confirming what communication will take place and to whom when this allocation has been reached (Quarterly or yearly). There was huge public interest in the Green Homes Grant Voucher Scheme and many people left disappointed as they were unable to secure an installation before the closure of Scheme. It is therefore worthwhile having a clear policy in advance to demonstrate how voucher applications and consumer interest can be managed, and if voucher applications can be carried over to the following financial year/quarter depending on the agreed approach.

While the BUS is a welcome government incentive, one of the main concerns raised by MCS certified installers during the initial Clean Heat Grant consultation was in relation to over-subscription of the limited funding available, and what this might do to the delivery of an installer's order books and therefore cashflow, towards the end of year if that year's funding has been exhausted. Clear communications are therefore essential as the funding limit is reached.

17. Do you agree or disagree with our proposed approach to issuing vouchers? If you disagree, please say why.

We support the issuing of vouchers, but lessons must be learnt from the Green Homes Grant Voucher Scheme process and the processes involved must be simplified, guarantee quick payments, within five working days to installers. The previous delays in payments with the GHGVS led to some installers and contractors being left out of pocket for completed work for long periods of time, which ultimately led to some companies going out of business. Also, with the GHGVS, delays in vouchers being issued to consumers created a backlog of orders for installers, which impacted on diary planning, work force and stock control. For further key lessons from the GHGVS, please refer to EEIG's analysis and recommendations:

https://www.theeeig.co.uk/media/1107/eeig_learning_lessons_green_homes_grant.pdf

18. Do you agree or disagree with the proposed approach to administering applications for voucher redemption? If you disagree, please say why.

While we broadly agree with the proposed approach, the burden of proof and evidence collecting all falls to the installer, rather than the householder and the installer would be the person making the application. The administration and time required to gather the level of proof required would be time consuming and impact on small businesses. We therefore suggest measures are taken to mitigate this where possible, for instance by providing ways to reduce the burden of proof and evidence collecting.

There should be support to supply chain. For example training on how the applications process will work. This levels the playing field Makes life easier for smaller installers.

We would support a self-declaration form from the householder to the installer, who can check requirements and then confirm those on the same form (online/paper check).

19. Do you agree or disagree with weekly payment cycles? If you disagree, please set out why?

We support the proposed payment cycles, ensuring that a system for regular payments is made as part of the Scheme and that installers experience no delays in payment. There should be a commitment by Ofgem to make a payment to the installer for the amount associated with the redeemed voucher, within five working days of the notification that the application has been successful.

20. Do you agree or disagree that installers should be required to inform property owners about the possibility of audits at the application stage and to confirm this to Ofgem? If you disagree, please say why.

We support a process of informing homeowners as to the possibility of audits and feel this should be made clear in the application process for householders. Ofgem should ensure of what would be included in an audit and the process and communicate this to the homeowner, so that they know what to expect if this were to occur. This may also help reduce the potential for fraud. It should be the responsibility of Ofgem, throughout the application process, that this is included on all paperwork and can be repeated by installers that an audit could be conducted to check the quality of the installation (to ensure the message is reinforced across all channels).

21. Do you agree or disagree with our proposed administration of withholding payments? If you disagree, please say why.

While withholding payments should be a last resort approach, we support the government ambition to ensure grants are only paid as a result of high-quality installations.

22. Do you agree or disagree with our proposed administration of offsetting payments and requiring repayments? If you disagree, please say why.

In the consultation document, Ofgem has the power to withhold grant payments during an investigation into an installer or in the case of non-compliance of an installer. One or more grant payments which would otherwise be payable may be withheld. We hope any investigation will be swift to provide clarity. If Ofgem decides to withhold a payment, it must send a notice to the installer specifying why this is the case and what steps the installer must take to rectify the situation or support an investigation. A time frame for resolution should be introduced and the impacts of further sanctions should be clearly indicated to an installer and support the right of review by an installer.

Ofgem's proposed process in this regard, offers an opportunity to involve MCS as the installer's certification scheme owner. If evidence of non-compliant installations through BUS were to be shared with MCS, this could result in the suspension of an installer's MCS certification, restricting their ability to raise MCS certificates until an installation(s) has been brought back into compliance, and as a result, restrict their access to further voucher applications.

23. Do you agree or disagree with our proposed administration of the right of review? If you disagree, please say why.

We support the right of an installer to request a review of decisions made to reject voucher applications by Ofgem.

24. How frequently would you like Ofgem to publish reports on vouchers issued and available budget? Please provide a frequency and your reasoning behind it.

The frequency of reporting for a new scheme is always difficult and we recommend monthly in the first year of the scheme to monitor the demand, speed of application process, vouchers issued etc to help predict future demands in the following voucher application periods. It would also be useful to record any issues arising for the Voucher application or approval process, to help improve the scheme as it moves forward and build in the flexibility to adapt processes and burdens of proof etc. It would also be useful to record the number of faulty installations and resolutions to gather evidence. The lack of reporting and communications with the GHGVS left many parties in the sector

disconnected and unable to get a clear grasp on how the voucher redemption process was going, therefore lessons must be learnt and applied to the Boiler Upgrade Scheme.

25. What additional information could be included in the reports? Do you have any suggestions for additional information that could be included in reports, or on the format of the reports?

In addition to reporting on the requirements in Question 24 it would also be useful to monitor the number of applications received and approved, broken down by technology type, budget ring fenced by applications, record any disputes, faulty installations, resolutions and number of actions being taken against companies, number of audits conducted. This would provide a clear indication of consumer interest, successful voucher redemption, number and type of applications and installations, and the number of complaints and those resolved and their geographical spread.