

Photovoltaic opportunities

Solar PV installations can play a major role in the fight against fuel poverty, writes Energeno Director Mark Elliott...

With level 4 of the Code for Sustainable Homes now mandatory for new build social housing, many landlords have buildings fitted with renewable energy technologies as standard. Some older stock too has benefited from investment in renewables such as solar panels to take advantage of financial incentives such as feed-in-tariffs (FiTs).

A lot of the discussion about the benefits of solar has revolved around FiTs but there is considerably more to the story when looking at solar as an opportunity to reduce bills and tackle fuel.

The original government grants offered for solar photovoltaic (PV) installations once provided social housing landlords with a 'quick fix' approach to improved sustainability and a way to reduce electricity bills for tenants. FiTs then replaced these grants and have since gone some way to positioning solar PV as more of a long-term investment. Even with the existing and planned cuts to FiTs, it's clear that the benefits of subsidies for landlords and discounted electricity bills for tenants will continue to increase as inflation climbs and utility companies increase their prices.

However, many social housing renewable energy projects were put on hold or even abandoned altogether in light of the well-documented FiTs debacle, which played out across the media earlier this year. What wasn't so widely reported is the fact that solar PV installations still have the potential to achieve considerable benefits for both social landlords and the people who live in their properties.

In October 2012, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation issued a report – 'Renewable Energy: Getting the benefits right for social housing' – which suggests in its findings that the full benefits of measures such as solar panels will only be realised if they are supported by efforts to encourage people to be energy efficient. The report points to the primary motivator for social landlords in installing PV schemes as fuel poverty and explained that a well-positioned PV installation could achieve significant savings of up to £220 per year. November saw the Energy Saving Trust estimate potential domestic savings even higher at £635. However, encouraging tenants to behave in an energy-efficient way in terms of timing and patterns of use for electrical appliances was significant in achieving the full financial benefits.

Earlier this year, a groundbreaking scheme to drive energy efficiency in homes in the Leicestershire village of North Kilworth had a dramatic impact on residents' behaviour.

A total of 80 energy monitors were handed out to residents in an initiative led by the Village Power Community Interest Company (CIC) as part of a programme of activities designed to reduce the village's carbon footprint. After just two months, two-thirds of residents confirmed that their energy usage had changed and the same number wanted more information on energy efficiency. Nine out of 10 said they would recommend the monitor to a friend.

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When such monitors are used with solar installations, they glow green when free electricity is available from the PV system, enabling residents to take advantage of this rather than paid-for electricity whenever possible. By showing energy usage across different appliances, they also drive up awareness of how to reduce consumption, thereby giving residents far more control over their energy use. As well as energy monitors, we are seeing a growing number of practical gadgets that can turn appliances or water heaters on automatically when free electricity is available – helping to reduce bills.

Saving energy for most people in fuel poverty is not just about insulation. Taking people to near self-sufficiency in electricity terms has to be the next goal, and monitors that give tenants the knowledge and power to optimise their free energy use are expected to play an increasingly important part in achieving this objective.



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