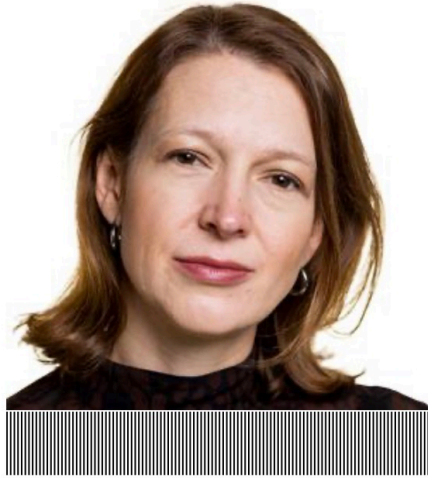


Martina Lees



Back to basics approach needed to pump up support for ripping out boilers

We are all supposed to rip out our gas boilers, but £5,000 government grants for heat pumps have had so little take-up that the scheme is on track to spend only half of its £450 million budget.

Last week the House of Lords environment and climate change committee released its damning report, which concluded that the government's Boiler Upgrade Scheme is "seriously failing" to deliver on its objectives.

If the present "disappointingly low" take-up rate continues, the report says, "only half of the allocated budget will be used to help households switch to low-carbon heating systems, a healthy market of installers and manufacturers will not be in place in time to implement other low-carbon heating policy measures smoothly, and the government's 2028 target is very unlikely to be met".

Baroness Parminter, who chairs the committee, told me her own experience shows the difficulty of replacing boilers with heat pumps in an emergency. When Parminter's gas boiler conked out during lockdown in 2020, her family was left without heating for three weeks. Even though she would have preferred a heat pump, getting one would have meant waiting far longer plus potentially upgrading radiators and insulation. "If I had subjected my children to six months of no heating, I wouldn't have survived. But yes, our next source of home heating will be a heat pump."

Fitting a heat pump is a complicated business where you need a good installer to visit your home and carefully design the whole system. Costs can add up. The government puts it at £7,000-£14,000, before any grants, although prices are coming down. Octopus, the renewable energy supplier, offers heat pumps from £2,500 after the grant, about the same price as a gas boiler.



SEVERAL STUDIES HAVE SHOWN THAT HYDROGEN WILL NOT BE THE BEST FUTURE OPTION

Under government plans, no homes will be built with gas boilers from 2025, and their sale will be banned from 2035. If domestic heating is to be decarbonised though, it won't be enough merely to stop gas boilers being installed. We have to decide what we want to replace them with, the main contenders being heat pumps or hydrogen.

The government's "indecisiveness" around hydrogen — about which ministers have put off decisions until 2026 — is confusing the public, Parminter says. Her committee heard "overwhelming" evidence that mixed messaging about hydrogen was "one of the problems which was contributing to very lacklustre take-up of the boiler upgrade scheme to date". She says: "Hydrogen for home heating is just not, in the short to medium term, a serious option."

People are confused. Even the residents of the country's first "hydrogen villages", where the government plans to test wide-scale adoption of hydrogen or heat pumps, are increasingly feeling caught in an impossible dilemma between heat pumps and hydrogen.

Several studies have shown that hydrogen will not be the best future option, and even the International Energy Agency says it expects the fuel to play a “negligible” role. Why, then, are people not rushing to install heat pumps? Apart from questions about their suitability for some properties and high costs (which include insulating a property before installation), a more fundamental problem is “very, very low awareness”, according to Parminter.

The government’s own figures show 62 per cent of people have little or no awareness that they need low-carbon heating, and 80 per cent have little or no awareness of air source heat pumps. “If you’ve got that as your baseline, it’s not surprising why initially this scheme has not kicked off as strongly as it should.”

“The challenge is massive,” Parminter says. About 50,000 heat pumps were installed in 2021; by 2028, the government has a “welcome ambitious target” for 600,000 installations a year. “That means a tenfold increase in heat pumps in less than a decade.”

The number of installers needs to increase from 2,000 in 2019 to 12,400 by 2025 and 50,000 by 2030, according to the government’s heat and buildings strategy. You need a few quotes to choose an installer, but “in some parts of the country, your nearest installer is an extremely long way away”, Parminter says.

The government’s constant moving of the goal posts — with [different schemes, different grants](#) — has left installers and homeowners baffled.

We could learn from others. France, for example, spends £350 million a year — compared with Britain’s £450 million over three years — on heat pump subsidies and pays for homeowners to get free, independent advice on retrofitting their homes. The market here will grow only if the government sends clear signals with carrots, sticks and funding to mandate retrofitting and heat pumps.

The government needs to be definite in its long-term support for heat pumps and launch an education campaign backed by meaningful grants for installation. It should also remove any link between the installation of heat pumps and the flawed Energy Efficiency Certification scheme. Longer term, it should also look at ensuring there are incentives to switch to heat pumps in the form of lower energy bills. If heat pumps are to be viewed as a serious alternative to gas by the public — rather than a passing fad for middle class eco-warriors — the government has to show it takes them seriously.