

Building Energy Usage



Heating and cooling of buildings

This energy supply sector is, after transport, responsible for the most CO₂ emissions. The challenge here is really twofold:-

1. Buildings need to be better insulated so as to not get too hot in the summer or too cold in the winter
2. The heating and cooling supplies need to be powered off renewable electricity

Again the challenges vary by country. Countries in the tropics have little need for heating but do need air-conditioning. In the UK, our challenges are:-

1. Houses that pre-date 1920 do not have cavity walls that can be insulated, so need to be retrofitted with external or internal solid wall insulation.
2. Most houses are either heated by natural gas or oil
3. 15% Hydrogen in natural gas supply is still being trialled. 100% Hydrogen necessitates a swap out of existing boilers
4. Tradesmen will need to be re-trained in large numbers in order to facilitate the transition to solar, heat pumps or hydrogen as well as solid wall insulation.
5. Externally insulating houses often needs to be carried out for entire streets, otherwise it does not look good aesthetically. In some cases, external wall insulation will stick out further than the roof eaves, so the roof would need to be adapted.
6. Internally insulating houses is very disruptive to households and would meet a great degree of resistance.

Potential solutions for buildings are a combination of:-

Solar Panels

This will be sufficient to generate electricity during the day from about March through to October. In the UK, these are most suitable in Southern England. If you are out during the day, the spare capacity can be fed back in to the national grid offsetting the costs of using electricity during nighttime hours.

Battery Storage

This can currently provide a few hours in the evening of electricity from what was generated during the day, but improvements in battery storage due to a need for that in electric vehicles (EV) are [driving down the costs of battery storage](#)

Heat Pumps

Heat pumps come in 3 different flavours:- * Air Source - most suitable for city dwellings if district heating is not an option. Challenges at the moment are that they do not provide as much heat as a gas boiler so your house needs to be fully insulated and radiators swapped for larger ones. * Ground Source - requires digging up your garden but makes sense for detached houses in the countryside which currently are reliant on oil for their heating * Water Source - suitable for buildings near lakes or other bodies of water

Heat pumps are 3 times as efficient as gas boilers. They do require electricity to power them but this could be supplied from solar panels/battery storage during the day. Challenges at the moment are that heat pumps do not provide as much heat as a gas boiler so your house needs to be fully insulated and underfloor heating required.

This solution works best if you're needing to replace an inefficient older gas, liquid gas or oil boiler and are not occupying your home.

Green Hydrogen

If trials of [Green Hydrogen](#) are successful, terraced housing in UK cities will especially benefit. Initially, the intention is that 15% of the natural gas supply be replaced by hydrogen (which doesn't require any boiler swaps) with a longer term aim of replacing natural gas completely (will involve phased switchover as occurred when UK moved from town gas (produced from coal) to natural gas in the 1960s & 70s)

External Wall insulation

Houses that have been built post 1920 in the UK, tend to either have cavity walls, or may conform to current building regulations that require thick enough insulation that houses do not lose a lot of heat. 1 of the problems in the UK, however, is that a lot of our housing stock pre-dates 1920 and is solid wall in construction. Internal wall insulation is, of course, an option as well as external, but most people will not relish the disruption or loss of internal space. Note: You do not need to insulate internal walls, so with terraced houses, it's just the walls that face to the front & rear that need to be insulated.

Considerations of external wall insulation include:-

1. Cost - The more effective an insulating material is, the higher the cost is typically
2. Aesthetics - Nobody wants their house to stick out from neighbouring houses - this is clearly less of a concern with detached properties, however.
3. Damp - Any insulation impacts the properties of the walls they're covering, so may trap water vapour which is generated within a home and which would otherwise escape.
4. Skills - Tradesmen need to be trained to understand the properties of wall insulation and hence avoid issues such as damp.

5. Planning permission - Due to the Aesthetics issue, you may need planning permission, so check with your local council first.

District Heating Schemes

District heating systems refers to a local council (or private company) generating heat centrally to power a local district of a town or city. Examples where this currently operates include [Copenhagen, Denmark](#) where burning of municipal waste is used to keep most of the city warm. Clearly, some degree of pollution capture would be necessary to make this option environmentally acceptable, but waste incinerators are already fairly common within city boundaries in the UK. Another example of district heating would be to use rivers, lakes or even heat from underground transport lines to power [air source and water source heat pumps](#). These will work well for houses near those sources. Ground source heat pumps could also be used under parks in a similar fashion.

Green energy schemes

This is where a local council will set up a scheme where they can bulk buy cheap electricity from renewable energy suppliers at a wholesale price and sell it to residents at a price slightly below what a resident would typically pay for their electricity bill.