

The new £10 million Clear Skies Initiative aims to give homeowners and communities a chance to become more familiar with renewable energy by providing grants and advice. Homeowners can obtain grants between £500 to £5000 whilst community organisations can receive up to £100,000 for installation and feasibility studies.

Clear Skies supports projects in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Homeowners and community groups in Scotland can apply for support under the , that has a fund of £3.7 million.

We are all becoming more aware of the threat posed by climate change. The gases, which cause climate change, are emitted from a number of sources. A major source is the use of fossil fuels to power our homes and businesses. Renewable energy, combined with energy efficiency, offers a viable and potent solution to countering the effects of global warming.

During the past few years, the Government has introduced measures to encourage the uptake of renewable energy and energy efficiency by power generators and businesses.

With the Clear Skies initiative, they are making a start at encouraging homeowners and community groups to take an active part in the climate change agenda and reap the benefits of renewable energy.

The different types of renewable energy offer different benefits but they all utilise non-polluting and effectively limitless energy sources. The technologies supported are, Solar Water Heating, Wind, Hydro, Ground Source Heat Pumps, Automated Wood Pellet Stoves, Wood fuel boilers.

Grants will only be awarded to homeowners where an accredited installer is to be used. These installers will work to a code of practice and be vetted beforehand to ensure that you get the most appropriate system for your needs, correctly installed at the right price.

Two general conditions of the scheme apply to applications. DIY installations will not attract a grant and the equipment installed must be new and not refurbished. Properties both on and off the electricity grid are eligible for a grant. Homeowners are also encouraged to seek at least two estimates before applying.

Details of the eligibility criteria are listed below. These details may change at any time without notice as the scheme develops. BRE reserve the right to decline an application.

The eligibility criteria are:

- Applicant must be the owner of the property for which grant is applied for.
- Applicant will be resident of the UK.
- Property must be located within England, Wales or Northern Ireland. Scotland has its own scheme.
- System must supply a building (mobile homes, caravans, house boats, etc are not eligible).
- System must be designed, installed and commissioned by an accredited installer.
- System must use components on the DTI's recognised product list.
- Installer will provide an estimate of the annual energy output of the system.
- Grants must be spent within 1 year of grant offer being made.
- Maximum of two grants awarded per applicant provided they are for different technologies.

One of the main benefits of using renewable energy is that it reduces emissions of carbon dioxide. When allied to energy efficiency measures, renewable energy is one of the most effective methods of reducing carbon dioxide emissions. We strongly advise all applicants to investigate all methods of increasing the overall energy efficiency of their homes. This includes such strategies as maximum insulation, and

GRANTS NOW AVAILABLE TO SUPPORT ENERGY EFFICIENCY

At long last the government is beginning to take steps to help improve the energy efficiency of the existing building stock. Although the money committed to the two schemes now in place is small at £30 million, it is a start, with we hope more to come, as without some serious incentives to upgrade our existing building stock it is unlikely that UK's commitments to the reduction in carbon dioxide omissions will be met.

More about the two schemes can be found at www.clear-skies.org which provides details of £10 million of new grants for renewable energy installations in existing buildings, with www.solarpvgrants.co.uk providing information on the £20 million of grants for community and homeowners photovoltaics programme.

purchasing household electrical equipment with an 'A' energy rating e.g. fridges, freezers, washing machines and light bulbs.

You can obtain grants for Photovoltaics (solar electricity) through the £20 million .

To apply for a grant or apply to be an accredited installer in England, Wales or Northern Ireland visit the web site at www.clear-skies.org or phone 0870 2430930; In Scotland visit the web site www.est.co.uk/scri or phone 0800 1388858. For the grants for Photovoltaics (solar electricity) visit the web site www.est.co.uk.

We hope that with time there are enough accredited installers to ensure that there is adequate competition or we could be in danger of seeing the grants swallowed up in higher costs. The Clear Skies web site at the end of February only lists 7 accredited installers! We also hope that the accreditation system is adequately policed to ensure that there is no abuse.

SURVEY REVEALS WIDESPREAD LACK OF ENVIRONMENT AWARENESS

By Susanne Baker

Many small businesses have a 'head in the sand' attitude when it comes to their legal environmental responsibilities, according to new research conducted for the NetRegs website

A national survey of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), conducted across a range of business sectors, reveals a widespread lack of environmental awareness among firms that believe they have little or no environmental impact.

SMEs generate about 60% of the nation's commercial waste and are responsible for as much as 80% of pollution incidents, contributing to poor air quality and contamination of land and water. But the majority of businesses questioned - a massive 86% - did not think their activities were harmful to the environment.

Only 18% of all businesses taking part in the survey for NetRegs, a joint initiative between the Environment Agency, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and Northern Ireland's Environment and Heritage Service in conjunction with the Small Business Service, could name any environmental legislation that applied to them.

It is against this backdrop of poor environmental awareness that the NetRegs website has been launched to provide SMEs with clear and concise information on how to comply with green regulations. The site explains complex environmental legislation using plain language and will eventually include guidelines for as many as 100 different business sectors. It free to use and anonymous - there is no need to contact the regulator.

The aim of NetRegs is to reduce the amount of environmental harm caused by smaller businesses in the UK, but the benchmarking survey shows there is a long way to go. When prompted, 58% of SMEs acknowledged that they were involved in at least one potentially damaging practice.

The majority of smaller businesses have no Environmental Management System (EMS) in place according to the survey. An EMS is a system of policies designed to help organisations manage their environmental obligations but only 17% of firms questioned currently have one, while another 11% are considering introducing such a system.

The research shows that larger SMEs are more likely to have an EMS

than smaller businesses. There is also significant variation between the different industry sectors surveyed, with 40% of small businesses in the chemical sector having an EMS in place, compared to only 10% of hotels and restaurants and 8% of printing and publishing firms.

Encouragingly, the majority (77%) of larger SMEs questioned, with 50 to 250 employees, said they had taken practical steps to reduce harm to the environment. However, the smallest businesses trail far behind, with only 28% of firms with 0 to 9 staff saying they had introduced such measures.

The most frequently mentioned measures were recycling (42%), energy efficiency/water reduction (12%), environmental assessment (9%) and implementation of a programme of environmental improvements (9%).

Over half of businesses addressing environmental issues said they were motivated by a general concern for the environment and the majority made the link between good environmental practice and commercial benefits.

Environment Agency chairman Sir John Harman said:

"The results of the NetRegs survey make stark reading. They show that the smallest businesses have a poor awareness of their environmental obligations and have a long way to go to catch up with larger companies, which have better environmental performance in almost every respect.

"The findings suggest an urgent need to improve the availability of environmental information to help small companies improve their performance which is why we have launched NetRegs.

"The site is not, however, a 'one size fits all' solution to the problem of environmental non-compliance, although it does contain general advice which is relevant to most companies. NetRegs will also include sector-specific guidelines covering the activities of just about every business sector imaginable."

Clive Glover, Electronic Regulatory Information Manager with the Small Business Service, said:

"The Small Business Service of the Department of Trade and Industry is happy to support NetRegs, a valuable tool for small and medium-sized businesses.

"All businesses have a duty to look after the environment, but research has shown that, worryingly, small businesses are sometimes unaware of the pollution they cause. The beauty of NetRegs is that it explains often complex environmental legislation using plain language, thereby saving small businesses time, money and hassle."

Environment Minister Michael Meacher said:

"NetRegs provides a very practical tool to help all and particularly small businesses understand and comply with environmental legislation. It provides the base from which to improve both environmental and business performance. I welcome this initiative by the Agency as part of their drive for better regulatory compliance and to promote and reward good performance."

ED I have to say that I have visited the site and found it disappointing. It only provided information where regulation or legislation applied, there was no discussion on the benefits of different materials, ways of working etc. I know that these subjects can be difficult and are going to offend some manufacturers but if we are serious about reducing our environmental footprint then these issue must be tackled. At our Autumn Conference in 2001 the BRE provided us with information on the way that different materials are being environmentally rated, but presumably because this is not a regulation it was not mentioned on the site.

The web sites address is www.environment-agency.gov.uk/netregs