

Home truths

The challenge and experience of making home energy improvements



**citizens
advice**

Introduction

In 2019 the UK government **announced** a commitment to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2050. To achieve this, people will need to make big changes to their homes.

The Climate Change Committee (CCC) **estimates** that around 15 million homes will need to install new insulation measures and all homes will need to use low carbon heating technologies such as heat pumps, hydrogen or be connected to a heat network.

It's vital that people have a good experience when it comes to choosing, installing and using these technologies.

A poor experience, or indeed hearing about a bad experience, could put people off from making much needed changes to their homes.

In this report, we've looked at three years of contacts to our Consumer Service from people who need help when it comes to installing low carbon technologies or making energy efficiency improvements to their homes.

The Consumer Service provides phone and web-based personalised advice to people on all consumer issues. People can get advice about their consumer rights and guidance about how to complain about a service or product.

Our data gives us a unique insight into the problems people face. It helps us to record and understand people's experiences - including their questions, concerns, problems and frustrations.

We know that people are confused and face numerous problems at different stages along the customer journey. This is not only a concern for the people affected - if left to continue, it could fundamentally derail the government's plans to improve energy efficiency and decarbonise heat in homes.

Extra statutory consumer protections exist for people when they take out a supply contract with an energy provider. But, no extra protections currently exist for consumers when they want to install insulation or new home technologies. This is despite the potential financial outlay and consumer detriment being much greater.

That's why we've been calling for the government to improve how consumers are informed, supported and protected in making changes to their homes by introducing a **net zero homes guarantee**. This would be a scheme focused on giving people confidence to install low carbon heating and energy efficiency measures. We need to make it easier for people to make informed decisions. This must include simple, enforceable protections so people can confidently engage with these new technologies.

Reaching the net zero target will require people to make changes to their homes. Some of these changes will be complicated and expensive. We need to equip people with the information and support needed to make this process easier.

If we don't tackle the current gaps identified in this report, we risk setting back the aims of a green recovery and the opportunity to truly create a fair energy transition that meets the needs of everyone, whilst also achieving the government's net zero target.

What we mean by home energy technologies

Insulation

We looked at all types of insulation that helps to keep heat in people's home, these include loft insulation, **1a** cavity wall insulation, **1b** and solid wall insulation **1c**

Solar PV panels **2**

Convert sunlight into electricity that can be used in the home

Solar thermal panels **3**

Help heat up water that can then be used around the home

Heat pumps **4**

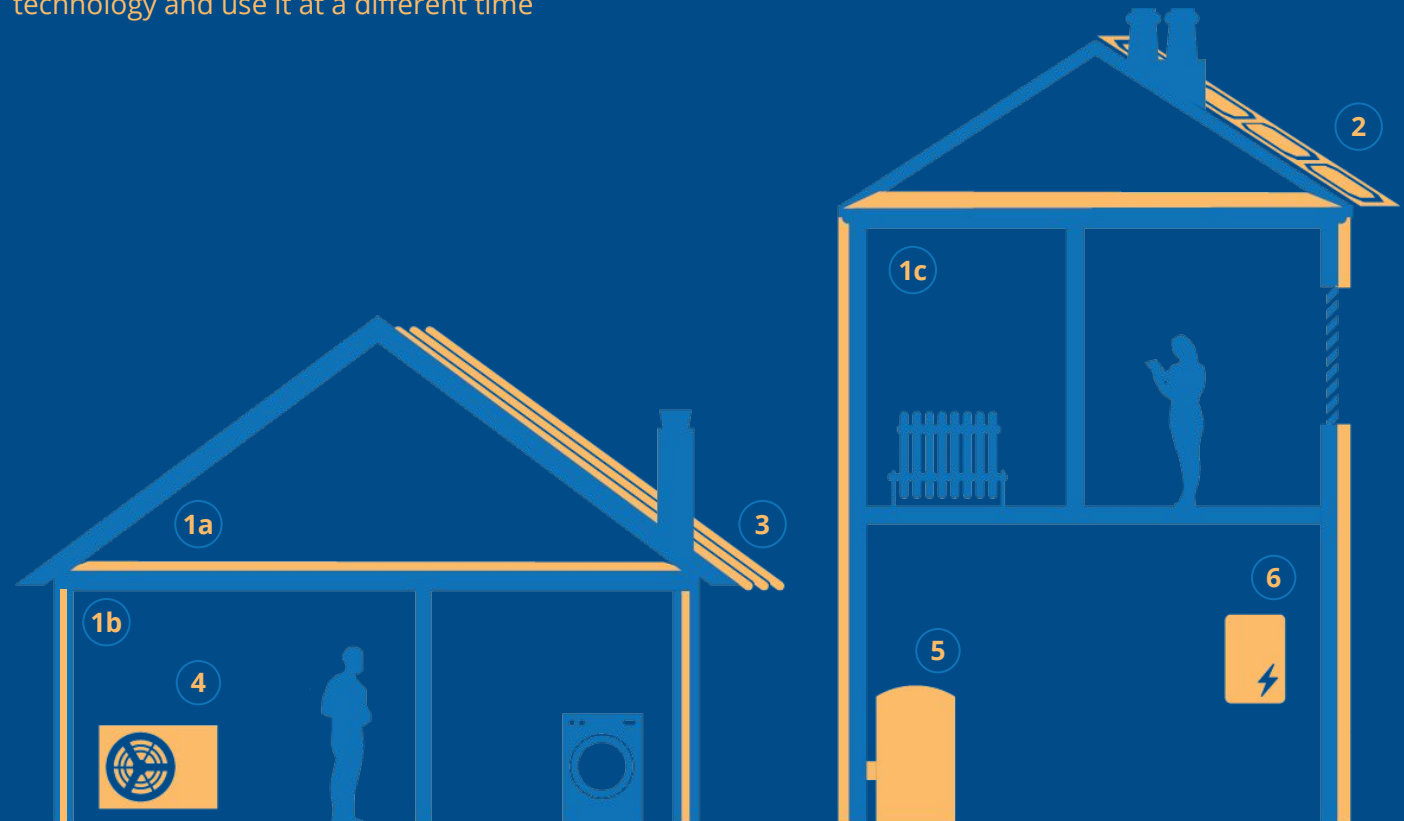
Absorb heat from the outside air or underground to heat homes and provide hot water

Biomass boilers **5**

Use sustainably sourced wood pellets to heat homes and provide hot water

Battery storage **6**

We've also looked at battery storage technologies that allow consumers to store electricity they have generated with their home technology and use it at a different time

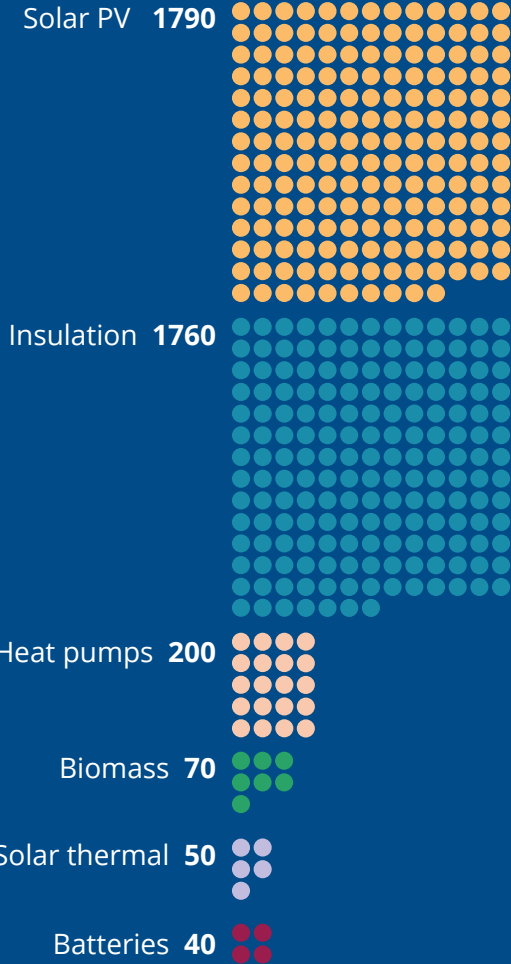


What consumers contact us about

Consumer Service contacts, by technology type

Average cases per year, 2018-20

● Each circle = 10 consumers

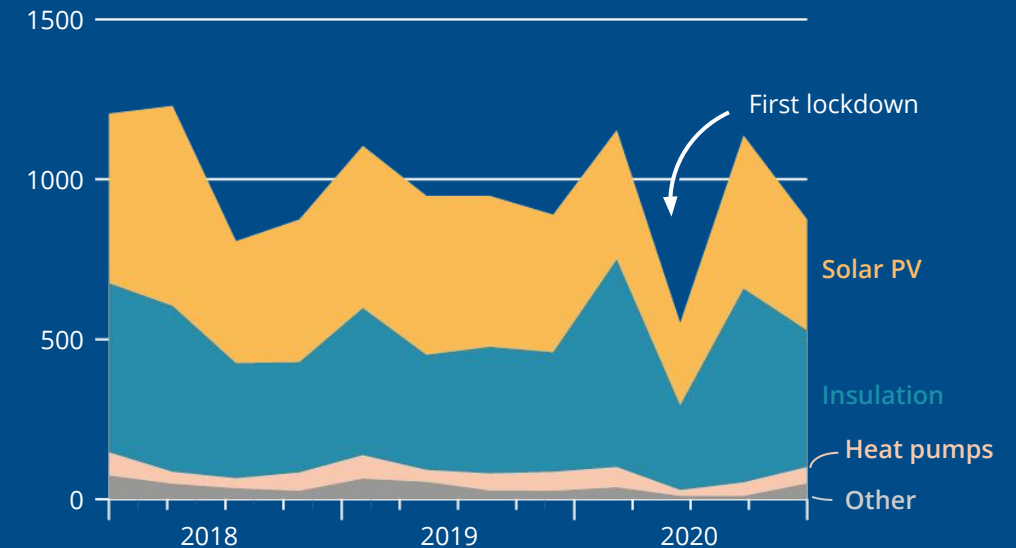


The vast majority of contacts - over 90% of all cases - were about solar PV or insulation. Contacts about heat pumps made up most of the other cases. Fewer people contacted us about biomass, solar thermal and battery storage technologies.

This split has been fairly consistent over time, as have the overall levels of cases. We saw a drop off in the number of complaints in April - June last year, due to the coronavirus pandemic, but case numbers rebounded in the next quarter.

Contacts by technologies over time

Cases per quarter, 2018-20



When consumers contact us

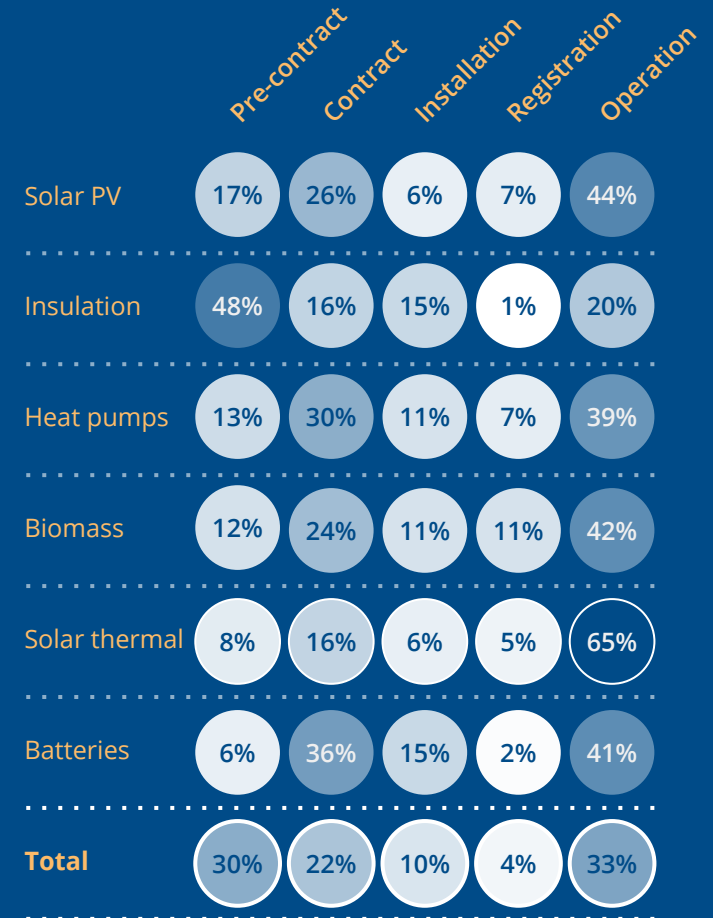
We sorted each case by the stage in the customer journey stage.

- Pre-contract**
 Before a contract has been signed or money exchanged. For example, if someone has been cold called by a supplier.
- Contract**
 If a contract has been signed but no work has been carried out, or if there is a problem with the contract terms and conditions.
- Installation**
 Problems with the installation or if technology isn't working as it should be soon after it's been installed.
- Registration**
 Issues registering a product with Ofgem or the government.
- Operation**
 There has been a problem during the ongoing use of the technology or product.

Contacts by stage of the customer journey

Most people contact us during the operation and pre-contract stages of the customer journey. Between 2018-2020 these contacts made up around two-thirds of all cases. Contacts in the contract stage made up most of the remaining cases. The contract stage made up the third highest number of cases in 11 out of 12 quarters. We received the lowest number of contacts in the installation and registration stage.

For each customer journey stage, we've looked at a sample of cases to find out what consumers were contacting us about. Throughout the report, we've also included case studies of the problems people face. All case studies have been fully anonymised.



Pre-contract

One of the most common times for a consumer to contact us is before a contract has been signed or money exchanged, for example if someone has been cold called by a trader.



Alex received a cold call from a company offering to install cavity wall insulation. They were told the insulation would be free of charge, as they would be entitled to a government grant. However, they then changed their mind about having the insulation done as the installer had no paperwork and the information on the website differs from that on Companies House.

The majority of these cases relate to cold calling and suspected mis-selling. For example, people tell us they feel pressured into signing a contract on the doorstep, and worry it might be a scam. People often contact us seeking reassurance as to whether the person they spoke to is a reputable installer or a rogue trader. This type of call is particularly common with insulation.

We also see a specific type of problem where people with a certain product already installed are specifically targeted with scams. For example, people with Solar PV panels being contacted by installers trying to convince them that they need additional technologies. Consumers are often talked into buying plug in-devices, 'magic boxes' and inverters by cold callers at their door or on the phone. They are told that these products will help their solar panels generate more electricity or make them more money, but there's often little basis for these claims.

People also report being contacted by companies telling them that the company that sold them their solar PV panels has gone bust: they then try to convince the consumer to sign a new contract with them.

Last year, we started to hear from consumers who had cold callers trying to convince them that they had been mis-sold the panels by their original installer. We saw cold callers offering consumers free solar PV panel checks. Many consumers are worried these are potential scams.

We see similar issues with insulation, where existing consumers are being targeted. They tell us that they have been contacted by an unknown company and told that their insulation needs replacing. This kind of case trades off well-publicised and serious problems some households have had with shoddy insulation. But many appear to be scams.

We saw a spike in this type of call after the Grenfell tragedy - with callers trying to scare people into removing insulation, or buying solar optimisers, at extortionate rates.

In the third quarter of 2020, we saw cases which detailed issues consumers were having with cold calls about free solar PV panel checks. In addition, consumers reported that some cold callers weren't following coronavirus guidance, such as not wearing PPE indoors.



Lyla received a phone call in 2018 from a company who said their guarantee had expired and that they had been given Lyla's details to provide maintenance to their solar panels. The company spent some time trying to convince them that the panels were not performing properly in the weather and offered a free check of the solar panels. Lyla then called the company who had actually installed the panels and they informed them that they had not passed on their details and did not know anything about this company.

We also see cases where installers of both solar PV panels and solar thermal panels have told people that they are 'government backed' or there was government funding available in an effort to convince consumers to have work done. Sometimes this includes consumers in vulnerable circumstances being talked into a contract for a product that isn't appropriate for them.

Many consumers struggle to find high-quality, accessible, and independent advice about home energy technologies. People contact us about heat pumps, biomass boilers and insulation asking questions about:

- what the installation might entail
- how the technology might work
- whether there's government grants available to fund it
- what planning permission is needed

We've also had a few cases of people seeking advice because they had received contradicting information from different installers, particularly about heat pumps.



Contract

Many people contact us because of problems with the terms of a contract they've signed.

In many cases it's clear that people are signing contracts which aren't right for them. Many solar panel PV consumers signed contracts after being promised savings on their energy bills, which turned out to be inaccurate.

Heat pump consumers tell us they feel like they have been misled by their installers as they were promised extra funding from the government to help pay for the heat pump or savings on their energy bills which didn't materialise.

In many cases the consumer signs a contract without fully understanding the funding or finance involved. We see cases where the caller - or their family member - has been talked into taking out loans or credit cards to pay for work on the understanding this would save them money.



Georgie is a person in vulnerable circumstances and has been mis-sold solar PV panels - they were told by the installer that they would be receiving at least £85 a month for selling excess energy to the grid. Georgie was planning to use this money to help pay for the installation. They never received this much money and have complained to the installer. The installer said there isn't much they can do. Georgie is concerned because they are tied into this contract which they can't afford, and they are having to cut back on the amount of heating they use to make ends meet.



Lena contacted us on behalf of their brother, who finds it difficult to make decisions for himself. Lena states that the installers knocked on their brother's door and said they can save him money on his energy bills by installing solar panels. Lena's brother agreed to this and is now paying for the panels. He had to take out a £22,000 loan to pay for them.

Some people contact us when they have problems getting a service they've paid for in advance - this can range from consumers who haven't received biomass pellets they have purchased, to people who are having problems getting installers to begin contracted work or to complete work they'd already begun.

Consumers often find it difficult to get a refund after they've cancelled work. A number of consumers with solar panels contacted us because they found it hard to get in contact with their installers after they had paid them money.

People also tell us that they have struggled to cancel contracts on behalf of elderly relatives. We have several examples of people contacting us because their elderly or vulnerable relative had been cold called by installers who encouraged them to sign a contract for insulation work they didn't need. They found it impossible to get their money back from the installer.



Jen purchased an air source heat pump in August, which was supposed to come with a government grant. The installer carried out an EPC (Energy Performance Certificate) check and was supposed to send this off so that Jen would receive the grant. However, Jen has never received any paperwork about the grant and took out a loan to pay for the work - Jen has to repay a certain amount each month. They need the government grant so that they can repay the loan, but the installer wasn't responding to Jen's calls and has now gone into liquidation.



Installation

People contact us about incomplete or faulty installations and want to know how to get things put right.

With installations, the most common issue people face is work not being completed to a good standard. For example, we hear from consumers:

- who've had a heat pump installed but can't get it to work.
- with battery storage who are concerned about how their battery has been fitted, and worry it's not wired correctly
- with solar PV panels whose meter isn't showing how much energy their panels are generating.

People sometimes contact us because they are worried the installed products are not right for their home. We also receive complaints where the wrong-sized heating system has been installed and isn't big enough to heat the consumer's home.

Another issue people tell us about is the installation process itself. Some consumers contact us because an installer has damaged their home during the installation process, or left their home in a mess afterwards.

Some consumers report solar PV installations causing damage to their roof, and scaffolding damaging the outside of the house.

Most people turn to us for help at the installation phase because they can't get their installer to sort out the problem they were having. Sometimes installers refuse to come back to their homes and fix issues because they don't think the problem is their fault - or won't admit it. This is a particularly common complaint with solar panels, and often the consumer has to get a different installer in to fix the issue. Sometimes, if the original installer is responsive the consumer may not trust them, and fear they might cause more damage.



Nadia has had solar PV panels installed but there was an issue with the wiring of the panels and they cannot be wired to the meter. They have asked for a new meter from their energy supplier, however, the supplier has stated that the installer needs to fix the wiring to the meter. Nadia contacted the installer but they were unwilling to come and finish the work.



Alice had solar panels fitted but has realised they keep making the electricity system trip and that the roof of the house is leaking.

Registration

The registration phase mainly applies to renewable technologies, which need to be registered in order to receive a government grant through the Feed in Tariff (FiT) or Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) scheme. While cases at this stage are relatively few in number, they can cause big problems for those affected. They can mean consumers missing out on payments, leaving them worse off than if they hadn't installed the new product.



Mari has solar panels and hasn't received any money back for the electricity they have generated. They have found out that the panels haven't been registered by the installers. The electricity supplier says they won't pay out because the panels weren't registered. Mari believes the supplier is responsible to some degree but they won't help, so Mari contacted the ombudsman who signposted them to Citizens Advice.

Most registration issues appear to be caused by the installer not filling in the right documentation or not providing the right certificates. We see cases where the installer has not registered the consumer's solar panels into the FiT scheme, leaving people without the payments needed to make the purchase worthwhile.

We also get complaints from people who are having trouble claiming RHI payments because they can't get the right certification from their installer. In some cases, this is because the installer has gone out of business before the consumer could submit the application. Some people have issues getting their Microgeneration Certification Scheme (MCS) certificate from their installer - which must be submitted with the claim for a RHI payment.

When problems like this do occur, the consumer often does not become aware of it until some time has passed after the installation.

These problems are made more difficult to resolve by the fact consumers often don't have much information about the scheme they should be signed up to. They may not know of the name of the scheme, only that it is 'a government grant.



Samira's father is a pensioner and has had solar panels fitted on his house. The installer provided the paperwork and Samira contacted a FiT supplier to submit the documents. They told Samira some documentation was incomplete and they needed more documents from the installer. Samira and her father are trying to get the right paperwork from the installer. Samira wants to know what they need to get FiT payments from their energy supplier.

We see 2 other types of issue with solar PV panels specifically. The first is where the panels are installed under a 'rent-a-roof' type scheme. This is where a finance provider pays for the panels on behalf of the consumer, on the basis that they then receive the benefits from the FiT payments. Sometimes they may be sold on to a second finance provider. This can leave consumers unclear as to who now owns the panels and how they might be able to buy them back.

People with rent-a-roof panels can run into problems if they try to sell their property. We hear from people who are struggling to find out who the panels on their house belong to and/or where they could get this information from. Consumers who contact us are extremely worried that they cannot sell or remortgage their home due to the solar panels. By the time they call us, they've often spoken to multiple parties and don't know where else to turn.

The second issue is where the consumer moves into a home which already has solar panels installed. These people sometimes struggle to understand how to identify and register the panels, meaning that they are not able to easily fill in the paperwork to receive the FiT.



Tim is selling their house. They had purchased it with solar panels but had never paid for the panels. They have been trying to sell the house but need a MCS certification to give to the new buyers. The installer wants £1000 to provide the certificate and has refused to take the panels off. Tim does not trust the installers and wants advice on whether this company still exists and if they should pay them for certification.

Operation

We get the most complaints at the operation phase, when the technology has already been installed but isn't working as it should be.



Around 4 years ago Sam paid £10,000 to have a biomass boiler installed, but they did not receive any pre-contract information. The boiler seemed to work fine for the first two years, but then developed faults. Sam had no hot water and heating for one year. The fault was repaired but the same issue keeps happening - the installer keeps offering to send someone out to fix the system, but are trying to charge Sam for this. Sam has refused to pay for the two most recent repairs as they should have been covered by the warranty and the issue hasn't been fixed. Sam would like the boiler to be replaced with a new one.

We often hear from people who've had either the wrong type of insulation installed or had it installed badly. This can cause significant issues like condensation, damp or severe mould, which can cause damage to their property and health.

People with solar thermal panels contact us about their system being faulty and because they have not seen their bills decreased as promised.

Sometimes consumers are struggling to use an appliance or technology in their home. Consumers with biomass boilers often get in touch with us because they want to know how to operate their boiler, and need advice about what pellets to use.

Across all technology types, where a consumer does have a problem, they can find it hard to get it repaired. Most commonly we see cases where the consumer cannot get in touch with the installer or the installer stops responding when they have been contacted about a problem.

Other issues people can face include:

- the installer cancelling appointments
- the installer taking longer than expected to fix the problem
- feeling they are being overcharged for repairs - something we see particularly with heat pumps

People also tell us that they have problems when their installer goes out of business. This is most common with solar PV panels. Often the consumer only finds out the installer is no longer trading when they try to contact them about a problem. In this case a consumer may contact Citizens Advice because they have no idea who to contact or how to get the problem fixed.

We persistently see issues with consumers struggling to redeem their guarantee or warranty when something goes wrong. Often this is because the original installer has gone out of business.

When the installer does not respond, or if the consumer no longer trusts the installer to fix the problem, consumers can find it hard to get a different company to look at the problem. Sometimes other companies don't want to deal with the faulty equipment in case they get blamed for the problem.

Cross-cutting trends

We have also noticed trends over the past 3 years which are not specific to a stage of the consumer journey or to a specific technology, but are still noteworthy.

One of the most prominent issues we have seen is the distress and confusion people experience as scams and fraudulent behaviours have become more sophisticated.

Traders have taken to incorrectly stating that they are 'government backed' or there are government grants available for consumers to convince them to get insulation fitted, or even removed. In the case of insulation, a significant number of consumers have told us that they have had installers come to their homes and tell them that their insulation was done incorrectly. In these cases consumers are often unsure of who to believe or who to ask for advice.

We also received a number of cases which, whilst not technology specific, indicated the confusion people felt around the options available to them and the information available online. We saw an increase in these cases in the final quarter of 2020.

These consumers often asked us for advice or reassurance about the grants and measures that are available to them and did not feel like they could get independent advice elsewhere.

In the second half of 2020, we also saw an increasing number of complaints about installers who convinced people in vulnerable circumstances to let them into their homes despite lockdown rules.



Conclusion

Looking carefully at the sorts of things people contact Citizens Advice about helps us understand the real-life situations they are dealing with.

This report takes a 'deep dive' into three years of data about the problems consumers have faced with home energy technologies, like insulation, solar panels, and heat pumps.

Our data shows the wide spectrum of issues people can have with these technologies, and the ways current policies are letting them down. In some cases these issues can cause really serious problems for the consumers affected.

These issues occur across the different stages of the customer journey. At the start of the customer journey, many people have difficulty understanding what home technologies to install. There is too little information about different options available.

It is very difficult for consumers to pick reputable installers. Too many people fall victim to rogue installers who provide misleading information. Many consumers end up signing up for contracts they don't fully understand and leave them worse off than when they started out.

Installations are not always done to a good standard. Sometimes problems occur during the installation process itself, other times problems come to light some time later. It's far from clear that monitoring and compliance systems are good enough to deliver the consistent quality that consumers need to have confidence in these technologies.

When things go wrong, many people struggle to get things put right. This is especially likely if their installer goes out of business or fails to respond.

Extra statutory protections already exist for consumers when they take out a supply contract with an energy provider. Our data shows further protections are also needed for people when they install technologies that affect their energy supply and the efficiency of their homes.

Investing in information, support and protections will give more people the confidence to engage with plans to improve efficiency and move to low carbon heat. A **net zero homes guarantee** would mean fewer people face problems in the first place and help them resolve issues where they do occur.

A net zero home guarantee would:

- make sure people are well **informed** about home technologies and have access to high quality advice
- **protect** people when things go wrong with their home technologies
- **support** people to find the right funding solutions

Without this support, many people will struggle to install the technologies needed to help the UK achieve net zero by 2050. It's vital that the government improves things so that people have confidence to make changes to their homes and are protected when things go wrong.

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With the right evidence, we show companies and the government how they can make things better for people.



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Contributors: Farhana Yeasmin and Joe Parrott

Design: Pete Broad

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