

HOME ENERGY ADVICE AND ASSISTANCE SCHEME – CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Chris Sennett

I had been wondering about installing solar water heating for years, but never got round to it, partly as a result of not knowing about suppliers but mainly as a result of not putting my mind to it. The scheme provided the necessary impetus and also knowledge of a good supplier who designed a system for us after discussing our requirements and checking our existing system. While hum-ing and ha-ing about whether to go ahead, our hot water tank developed a leak which concentrated our minds somewhat – if you are going to replace a hot water tank you would be crazy not to have solar heating to supplement the heating you have. That has certainly proved to be the case in practice.

Some preliminary results are quite surprising. During a sunny period in October, the solar system provided nearly all our hot water. In July, with the old system we were using about 12kWh per day for water heating whereas with the solar system in October and November we have averaged 4.6 kWh per day for supplementary heating. Part of the difference must come from inefficiencies in the old gas fired boiler and the fact that the gas consumption includes cooking, but the solar collector still provides a lot of energy, even in Autumn. The down side is that currently we are providing supplementary heating with an immersion heater, so we won't be reducing our carbon footprint until Spring or Summer. (The carbon equivalent of a kWh of electricity is roughly three times that of a kWh of gas heating.) We will probably convert to supplementary gas heating later.

Another down side is that the new hot water tank is much bigger than the old one and we have had to give up some airing space.

Our second foray into the scheme was to do with loft insulation. This was another thing I had been meaning to get around to for years, but never actually succeeded. I should explain that our loft space is complicated – one contractor I invited in, poked his head in to the loft, took one look and said, “No!” There are some very large heating ducts and a boarded area which was not insulated. The loft is also ventilated so you need to be careful not to impede airflows. The scheme's advisor, Deb Turnbull, pointed out all the technical difficulties and what to do about them. This technical input is invaluable, but having Deb around also keeps the project moving and meant we did not do half measures or skirt round any of the difficulties – I never realised lofts were so complicated. After the initial report, Colwall Greener provided us with a contractor, another session with Deb, and then the project was under way and six days later (I told you it was a complicated loft!) we were sitting in a house which feels perceptibly warmer.

All I have to do now is wait for our utility bills and see how much we have saved: we have already had our lowest ever quarterly gas bill.