

SPECIAL REPORT

The Microgeneration Certification Scheme - what does it all mean?

The Microgeneration Certification Scheme will produce an approved list of microgeneration products such as heat pumps, solar heating collectors and non roof integrated solar photovoltaic products. The scheme hopes to offer greater protection to consumers and help improve the reputation of microgeneration technology based on quality and reliability. HPM takes a closer look...

As environmental concerns have continued to move their way up the political and social agenda at an ever increasing rate, renewable energy has become more prominent. This has been demonstrated by the number of electrical contractors venturing into solar and heat pump installations as well as many builders merchants investing in renewable energy solution divisions.

The microgeneration industry has also been growing, aided by the launch of the Clear Skies scheme by the DTI (now BERR) in 2003 which was managed by the Building Research Establishment (BRE). Predominantly a grant scheme it also incorporated a registration scheme for both installers and products and was the basis on which installers and products could become registered.

Short period of time

However, as the industry was at the time in its infancy, it was only ever intended to be used for a short period of time. The scheme was extended beyond its initial intended life until early 2007 but as technologies and the industry had developed markedly, the original procedures were outmoded and a replacement was needed.

That replacement is the new Microgeneration Certification Scheme (MCS). Designed to evaluate products and installers against robust criteria for microgeneration technologies and to provide

greater protection for consumers, it is run by BRE and in addition to protecting consumers it will also help to ensure that government grant money is spent effectively. It is intended that it will underpin BERR's Low Carbon Buildings Programme, a grant scheme that is



An installation in progress in Derby

available to consumers and installers certified under the MCS or equivalent schemes.

BRE's operation of MCS has also recently gained United Kingdom Accreditation Service (UKAS) accreditation. "We are pleased that BERR's industry-led scheme now has an operator who is UKAS accredited for the MCS," says Energy Minister Malcolm Wicks.

"By improving reliability and offering consumer protection, we expect the scheme to play a key

part in driving up quality and creating a sustainable market for microgeneration products and installers in the UK."

BRE say that the MCS aims to assist the continued growth of the microgeneration industry based on quality and reliability, while pro-

viding consumer confidence in microgeneration products and installers. The MCS also naturally hopes to make a substantial contribution to cutting the UK's dependency on fossil fuels and thereby reduce carbon emissions.

The certification schemes for both installers and products are now fully operational and are open to applications from all technology areas including solar heating collectors (non-roof integrated), solar PV (non-roof integrated),

micro wind and heat pumps). Work is underway to finalise standards for roof integrated solar PV and solar heating collectors, inverters, biomass, hydro turbines, combined heat and power and fuel cell products. This means that specifiers working in microgenera-

tion will soon be able to choose from a recognised list of approved products.

Tony Barnes, Calorex Heat Pumps sales director, is looking to capitalise on being the first heat-pump manufacturer to be MCS approved. "We're very keen to see a swift rollout of the scheme so that heat pump technologies are incorporated as seamlessly as possible into the domestic heating sector," says Barnes. "The scheme should provide a platform where

the UK construction industry, housing providers, skilled installers and last but not least consumers benefit from renewable technologies such as heat pumps. Provided of course that they are designed, specified, supplied and installed correctly they are reliable, robust and much more straightforward than many people would initially assume," he says.

There are however potential problems for the MCS. For instance, some may question why microgeneration requires such a robust certification scheme.

Chris Roberts of BRE, says: "Microgeneration technologies are often not an essential purchase for consumers and sometimes do not make absolute financial sense in terms of payback.

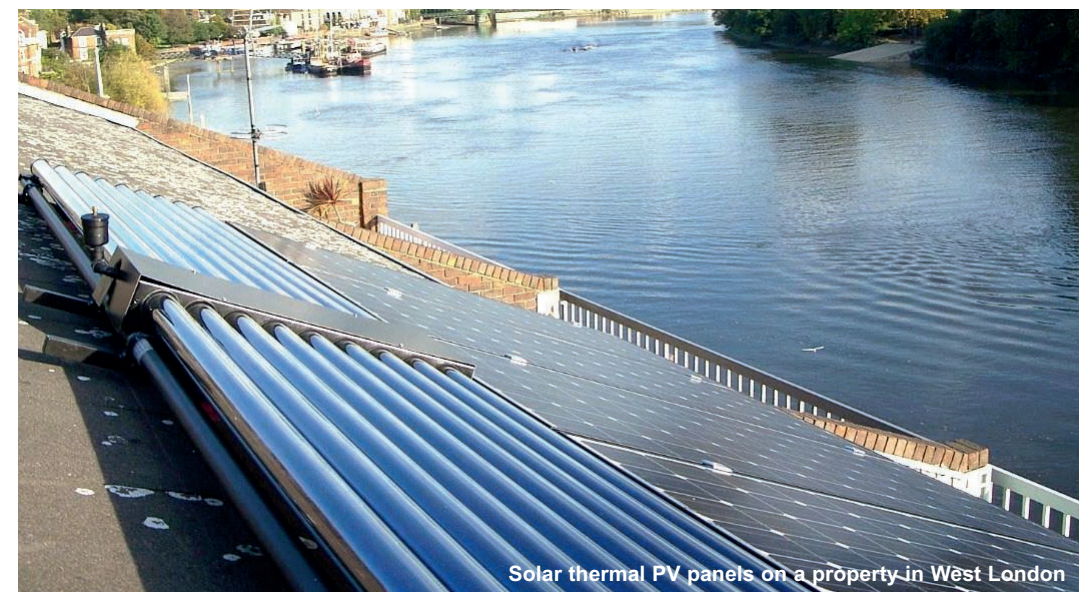
Therefore we feel that the reassurance that only a scheme like the MCS can provide is necessary to encourage them to part with the amount of money needed to purchase a microgeneration system."

Rogue traders

A further problem is the old and rather ugly issue of rogue traders. "In order to grow the industry and improve the financial arguments, the government supports micro-generation through numerous initiatives from fiscal support to recognition in regulations such as building regulations. This is welcome and such attention attracts new companies to the sector," says Roberts.

"Many of these new companies are committed to supplying good quality service at a competitive price, but others may be less committed to that quality and may be simply 'jumping on the bandwagon'. Sadly it only takes the reporting in the media of one or two consumers to have had an unpleasant experience caused by 'cowboys' to tarnish the industry for the majority of good companies," he says.

BRE envisage that the MCS will set high standards of quality to engender consumer confidence and a clear method for the respectable companies to differen-



Solar thermal PV panels on a property in West London

tiate themselves in the market place.

"The scheme is often criticised for requiring a higher level rigour and cost when compared to schemes for fossil fuel based energy systems. Our answer to that is that traditional systems are more of a necessity (almost all homes need a heating system), have a lower capital cost (because the market size is vastly different), are more



Aylesbury Town Council has used products listed under the MCS

familiar to most consumers so they are less nervous about them technically, and do not enjoy anything like the same level of support from public funds," says Roberts.

But what will the scheme mean for installers? In short Roberts believes there will be a lot more business. "It allows the installer to benefit from the numerous government initiatives and also gives

them a powerful marketing angle. The installer does have to achieve a high standard of workmanship as defined by the scheme's published technical standards. These standards go beyond the basic legal minimum requirements in many respects," he says.

James Hoare, managing director of installation company Ardenham Energy, says: "As most buyers in this sector are relatively inexperi-

enced being MCS certified provides consumers with a level of assurance and because of this we have secured more business." Hoare also believes that being MCS certified gives his company an advantage in terms of marketing and public relations.

"MCS reflects a high level of competence and professionalism, and is an achievement to be proud

of. With previous high levels of misrepresentation in the solar hot water industry with non approved installers, the MCS is important as the public are generally confused by this sector and the requirements in terms of competence," he says.

Also confident that gaining MCS accreditation is a positive move from his installation company is Adam Westray, AWE Energy managing director.

"Our customers gain peace of mind from the knowledge that we have to achieve high standards of workmanship and professionalism to be included in the scheme. Having been approved by the MCS has resulted in a large increase in enquiries which we hope will lead to an increase in installation work," he says.

The general public

So what exactly will the scheme mean for the general public? And if an installer or a manufacturer is MCS approved does it really make a difference?

"When dealing with an NCS approved supplier, the customer will receive a microgeneration system installed to a high standard and protection in the unlikely event that things do go wrong. They will also receive quality information to help their buying decision such as, for example, a conservative estimate of the energy performance of the proposed system," says Roberts.