Improving EPC ratings

It has been announced that in the future properties will have to meet a minimum energy performance certificate (EPC) rating before they can be let to tenants. The current proposals for the private rented sector are as follows: -

- Properties must have an EPC rating of E at change of tenancy from 1 April 2020
- All rental properties must have an EPC rating of E by 31 March 2022
- Properties must have an EPC rating of D at change of tenancy from 1 April 2022
- All rental properties must have an EPC rating of D by 31 March 2025
- In some situations there will be exemptions, including where it is not cost effective or technically feasible to carry out improvements to a property. The details of what the exemptions will be have not yet been announced.

The EPC rating is a measure of the cost to heat and power the home based on a set of assumptions about occupant behavior. The higher the cost the lower the rating. Therefore homes heated by expensive on-peak electricity will in most cases perform worse than homes heated by cheaper gas or renewable resources like biomass. Equally, properties which don't retain heat will be more expensive to heat and therefore have a lower EPC rating than properties which are well insulated.

Below are 11 suggestions of ways to increase the EPC rating of your property. As a very general rule you can expect the following improvements to the EPC rating (there are roughly 10 points in each of the A-G EPC bands): -

- More efficient/cheaper to run heating – up to 40 points
- Better heating controls – up to 5 points
- Install wall or loft insulation – up to 11 points
- Higher performance glazing – up to 4 points
- Low energy lighting – around 1 point

1. Scrutinise the EPC – unfortunately it is very common for assessors to make errors and unnecessary assumptions when carrying out the EPC and this can have a big impact on the rating. For example, if they don't check whether there is insulation in the loft space of a house or top floor flat built before 1955 then the EPC software will assume there is none, yet 94% of properties in Scotland do have at least 10cm of insulation. We therefore recommend you ask to see all the data entries they used when making the assessment and challenge any that you know are incorrect. The assessor is only allowed to input information that they have evidence is correct so there must be visual or robust documentary evidence.

2. Fit a more efficient boiler – older boilers can be less than 70% efficient whereas modern condensing boilers are over 90% efficient. Boilers account for about 55% of what occupants spend in a year on energy bills, so an efficient boiler makes a big difference. The typical cost of replacing a boiler is in the region of £2000.

3. Fit modern electric storage heaters

(i) Fan assisted storage heaters – fan storage heaters are smaller, better insulated and more responsive than traditional storage heaters.

(ii) High heat retention electric storage heaters - these retain more heat than other models and claim to be 27% cheaper to run than comparable static storage heaters. Modern storage heaters should also incorporate better controls than traditional models. For example, there is usually a thermostat so that the heater switches off when it has reached a certain temperature. Many models also have automatic charge controls which will control how much heat they store overnight depending on the heater's internal thermostat as well as changes in daily weather patterns.

4. Improve central heating controls (programmers, TRVs and room thermostat)

(i) Room thermostat - where a dwelling does not have a room thermostat, the heating system may not switch off when the dwelling is up to temperature. A room thermostat will automatically turn off the boiler when the dwelling reaches the temperature set by the occupant. Wireless thermostats are available to prevent the need for any wiring back to the boiler and cost around £200 fitted.

(ii) Programmer - where the dwelling does not have a programmer (or a time clock) to control when the heating comes on and goes off, the use of the heating is controlled simply by an off-on switch. Fitting a programmer allows the hours of operation of the heating system to be better controlled to suit the needs of the occupant and should cost around £120 fitted.

(iii) TRVs (thermostatic radiator valves) - unlike a room thermostat which gives a centralised control over the dwelling temperature and can shut the boiler down when the dwelling is up to temperature, TRVs control the temperatures in individual rooms, and only shut down individual radiators. Fitting TRVs provides better control of temperature across the whole dwelling. In a property with eight radiators the cost would be around £250 to fit TRVs.

5. Replace/remove secondary heating - if dwellings have a secondary form of heating e.g. a gas fire in the living room, the EPC software will assume that this is used for some of the heating in the dwelling. Secondary heating appliances are often extremely inefficient e.g. solid fuel open fires are typically less than 30% efficient while mains gas decorative fuel effect fires open to the chimney typically have a 20% efficiency rating. Removing these appliances can mean that the EPC software assumes all of the heating comes from the main heating system which is usually much more efficient and therefore improves the EPC rating. Alternatively, secondary heating can be replaced with something more efficient e.g. a solid fuel stove which can have an efficiency rating of around 65%.

6. Fit insulating jacket to hot water tank – according to the Energy Savings Trust, fitting a good quality jacket around the hot water cylinder will cut heat loss by more than 75%. They cost as little as £15 and yet will typically save more than this each year in fuel cost savings.

7. Fit thermostat to hot water tank - the presence of a cylinder thermostat will stop the boiler supplying heat to the tank once it reaches the desired temperature. This reduces the energy consumed in heating the hot water. Cylinder thermostats should be installed by a boiler engineer and should cost around £120 fitted.

8. Cavity wall insulation – if your property has a cavity wall this is another really cost effective improvement you could consider. The cost is around £400 and should pay for itself within 5 years in energy savings. The insulation is installed into the cavity through small holes drilled in the mortar joint between the bricks. To find an installer go to the National Insulation Association - http://www.nia-uk.org/consumer/. Cavity wall insulation is not suitable for all cavities and can lead to very serious damp problems if it is installed in unsuitable properties, if unsuitable materials are used or if it is installed badly. Make sure you use a reputable installer who carries out a thorough preinstallation assessment and provides a long term guarantee.

9. Loft insulation – suitable for houses or top floor flats, this is one of the most cost effective improvements which should pay for itself in fuel savings within 2 years. It can lead to energy savings of up to 20%. The cost for an average house tends to be around £300. To find an installer go to the National Insulation Association - http://www.niauk.org/consumer/.

10. Double glazing – this is not a particularly cost effective improvement when viewed purely on the basis of installation cost vs annual energy savings as the typical payback period is often more than 15 years. However, it can improve the comfort of the home and noise transmission from busy roads etc. and is usually popular with tenants, making it easier to let the property. If your property is listed or in a conservation area you will need consent from the local authority.

11. Fit low energy lightbulbs – although low energy lightbulbs will only make a small difference to the EPC rating, they are cheap and easy to fit and suitable for all properties so are worth doing, especially if your property is on the threshold between two EPC ratings.

Further advice

Please note that the EPC recommendations report is NOT a reliable tool to use to work out what improvements to do to get to a particular EPC rating. Landlords should seek further advice before installing measures to ensure that they are suitable for their particular property and find out what the likely impact on the EPC rating will be. EPC providers can model your property with different improvement measures and tell you what the effect on the rating will be, before you spend any money on improvement works. To find an EPC assessor or retrieve a copy of the current EPC for your property go to https://www.scottishepcregister.org.uk/. Funding For information on funding which is available to landlords in Scotland visit the Energy Saving Trust “support for landlords” page at www.energysavingtrust.org.uk/scotland/businessesorganisations/landlords or call Home Energy Scotland on 0808 808 2282. Funding may also be available based on the status of tenants, particularly if they are elderly or on low incomes. To find out more about whether this might apply tenants should contact Home Energy Scotland for advice on 0808 808 2282.