**Condemned by the man from the energy police**

Caroline McGhie <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/property/3357919/Condemned-by-the-man-from-the-energy-police.html>

12:01AM BST 08 May 2007

**Lovely old homes may be seriously disadvantaged by efficiency assessments for the proposed home information packs. Caroline McGhie meets a couple who found the concerns are all too accurate**

David Hitchings and his wife Gwen have lived at Knapp Farm, in the beautiful Hampshire village of Broad Chalke, for 55 years. Their pretty, five-bedroom thatched house has been in the family since 1887 and overlooks watercress beds that their forebears have farmed for generations. But their sense of owning a prize property was shattered when the energy ratings inspector came to assess their house for a Home Information Pack (HIP), so that they could put it on the market in the summer.

"I was so furious about it that I rang Strutt & Parker [the selling agent] and said I had never seen such a ridiculous thing in my life," says David. "I understand comparing a 1920s house with a 40s, 60s and 80s house, but not with a place which is hundreds of years old. Almost every section on the form didn't apply to it."

Should the hugely controversial packs go ahead, in the wake of a scathing attack in the House of Lords last week, homeowners selling after June 1 would be legally obliged to provide one of the new Energy Performance Certificates. HIPs will also include local searches and other essentials about each property. All over the country assessors are being trained to enter our homes and estimate our energy output. They will use a system first developed for new and nearly-new houses in Milton Keynes, which has been adapted for national application. The Hitchings' house, in an idyllic spot eight miles from Salisbury, with a tennis court, swimming pool, billiard room and listed Grade II, was marked Very Poor in seven categories and Average in three others.

"The main walls got a Very Poor," says David. "They are solid brick, and the assessor wrote that the insulation was "as built", which means no insulation at all. To improve it he said I could add two inches of insulation to the outside, but on a Grade II listed building that would be seriously frowned upon. Or he suggested two inches on the inside - imagine ripping everything out and doing that.

"The main roof got a Very Poor because he said it had no insulation. But it is thatch, which is two feet thick and more in places, so how can this be? The assessor said he didn't count thatch, he only counted insulation applied to the top of the actual ceiling. And the suspended timber floors, which are the bedroom floors, got a Very Poor. Well, what do you do about that? Rip it all up and start again?" The windows were categorised as single-glazed but David says he puts up secondary glazing in the winter. "The assessor said that doesn't count. The only thing that counts is double-glazed glass units.

"Then we went on to talk about the heating. We have an oil standard boiler and thermostats in every room, so we never have to heat a room we aren't actually using. For this we were given an Average. The coal open fires got Very Poor, but all we use is timber from the farm so it is very sustainable and efficient and we don't use coal at all."

David is particularly annoyed by the fact that the low energy light bulbs, which he has throughout the house, are not taken into account. "Lighting was Very Poor. He said low energy bulbs don't count unless you have low energy fittings. He said if we move house we might take all the bulbs with us but we couldn't take the fittings."

The assessment on outgoings and costs also has David hopping. "At the moment he estimates I am spending £197 on lighting, £2,422 on heating the rooms, £193 on hot water, £2,812 overall. If I make all the changes he suggests - new glazing, insulated ceilings, low energy light fittings, the lot - it would reduce my bills to £2,072, which would save me £740 a year. But I looked at last year's bills and I spent £2,039, which is £33 less than he thought I could do after all those changes."

The total HIP package, of which the energy report is only a part, cost £500 and the Hitchings feel they have been "taken for a rather pricey ride". But the key question is, will it put buyers off? Graham Waterton of Strutt & Parker, says: "My hunch is that for the buyer who finds old houses difficult and is afraid of spiders and damp, such an assessment will confirm their bias. But for people who love old houses, it won't put them off." He has given the house a guide price of £850,000 to £900,000. "But the real concern is that homeowners will worry before the energy assessor arrives and will make improvements in advance which could be a waste of time and money. Low energy light bulbs and secondary glazing, for instance, don't raise the score one jot.

"Then they will get their scores, see the improvements recommended and we will have the whole problem of listed building consent and huge disruption to houses. Dry lining walls can mean moving wiring, radiators, plumbing, skirting boards, coving and all sorts of things. And replacement windows have got much better, but they still don't look right on an old building. Imagine the cost, and then you only improve your score by a couple of points."

The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) is deeply concerned that older houses will be damaged as a result. "The software for the energy assessment ratings is geared to modern buildings, but in theory they are meant to bypass parts of it for older buildings," says Douglas Kent, SPAB technical advisor. "Assessors aren't, in our view, getting adequate training, and alarm bells are starting to ring about how these reports are being implemented. Old buildings often have thermal mass and inherent sustainable qualities which aren't taken into account. It is no good stuffing them to the hilt with environmentally efficient extras without taking into account the damage it will do to the historic fabric."

He points out that it is very important for old buildings to be able to breathe, and that over-insulating could cause mould, damp, and possibly increased asthma. "If the energy assessors get the projected heating costs incorrect, which is quite likely, then owners will soon start to take it all with a pinch of salt," he says. "There will be huge problems." If certificates contradict each other (see Tregunter Road example, below) then their reliability is also undermined.

But is there another reason for gathering and storing this information on the energy efficiency of our homes on a central database? "It could be that at some time in the future the energy rating of a property could form part of the basis upon which properties are valued for Council Tax," says a report out from Savills last week. "Also a poor energy rating may be used by a potential purchaser as a reason for renegotiating the price." So a package introduced to prevent so many sales falling through could become a major influence in setting buyer and seller against each other. What buyer is not going to add up the cost of an energy-efficient retro-fit and demand a cut in price? "Clearly this will cause difficulties as some of the recommendations will not be practical, given the unusual construction of many older houses and the planning constraints, and it will cause some to negotiate on price," says Christopher Lacey, specialist in HIPs at Savills.

The Energy Performance Certificate is perhaps not quite as straightforward and harmless as the label on your fridge, though the idea is laudable. Once obtained, its uses may be many and various. For instance, there has been talk that at some time in the future it might affect how much you can borrow. There may come a time of "green mortgages" when lenders give more to those with lower fuel bills because it will allow them to make higher repayments. Green mortgages, geared to buildings that make a positive environmental impact, are already beginning to appear. "If the energy ratings become a commodity, then you open a whole can of worms," says Richard Oxley, a conservation architect working on a new English Heritage guidance on energy conservation in historic buildings.

As global warming takes over our lives, how else might this central database be used? What will happen to the key high-carb culprits? The Environmental Change Institute at Oxford University came up with the target of the "40 per cent house", which would make 60 per cent savings in carbon emissions.

The study looked at houses of all periods and how each could be improved, and laid out a vision in which all homes would be refurbished and the worst replaced. All new homes after 2020 would be ultra low-energy and lighting and appliance consumption would be reduced by 44 per cent with the help of low and zero-carbon technologies. The demolitions would start with 80,000 a year from 2016, and would total 3·2m by 2050.

To decide which houses under-perform, you first have to have a national energy rating system, and now we have one. The Victorian terrace is particularly vulnerable. The Centre for Alternative Technology, which pioneered a low-energy house back in 1976, points out that the badly insulated Victorian house uses five times as much energy to heat as a new house. So should they be put to the sword? "As building regulations become stricter, so the energy efficiency of homes will increase, further raising the question as to whether it is better to pull down and re-build, rather than attempting to retrofit better energy-efficient measures," it says.

Of the 21 million homes in Britain, around four million are pre-1918 and a similar number were built between the wars, so, in theory, eight million houses need improvement to meet required standards. Add post-war building booms and the number only goes up. The Chartered Institute of Building, building suppliers and others in the industry are only just beginning to realise that the scale of the possible refurbishment programme triggered by the new certificates could be immense.