

How a green skills shortage could thwart our climate commitments

Maddyness is collaborating with environmental publication Ours to Save to bring readers fresh perspectives on sustainability. In this piece, we highlight the UK's shortage of skilled green workers. Only with a large enough green workforce will we be able to meet our net-zero commitments

The £1.5B Green Homes Grant Scheme (GHGS), the UK's most significant green stimulus package to date, was scrapped in March after it became clear the scheme was not feasible.

A shortage of skilled green workers left the government unable to follow through with green-retrofit works across the UK, installing only 5,800 energy efficiency measures in homes compared with the 123,000 applicants.

"There simply were not enough people skilled to do these jobs", Harriet Lamb, CEO of *Ashden*, tells me. At the time, Lamb wrote a piece for *Business Green* highlighting the need to address the skills gap and support our transition to net zero.

Ashden is a climate solutions charity; it provides a platform for green innovators, showcasing solutions that will help us move to a low-carbon society.

Concerning the unveiling of the GHGS, Lamb comments: “That was really fantastic when they came out with the Green Homes Grant, both personally and professionally.”

“But then the penny began to drop. It was well intentioned, but didn’t have the long-term underpinning to work.”

“So of course it fails. It fails, because there wasn’t a proper policy behind it, about how to ensure you have the trained people to do the work.”

The UK’s current government was elected having promised to lay the groundwork for a net-zero UK by 2050, racking up momentum towards the UN’s COP26 Climate Summit – to be held in Glasgow this November.

COP26 will gauge countries’ compliance with the goals set out by the 2015 UN Paris Accord. Signatory countries are expected to reach net zero by 2050, as per efforts to contain climate change to +2.0 degrees vs pre-industrial levels.

In *its 2019 manifesto*, the Conservative party confirmed it would “ask our global partners to match our ambition” at COP26. However, the UK government needs to act on its ambitions before it can credibly ask others to follow suit.

How do homes fit into the climate equation?

Residential CO2 emissions make up an estimated 15% of the UK total, so reducing these emissions is of paramount importance. Since the UK has the draughtiest homes in Europe, providing homes with better insulation is a simple and effective way to stop heat loss (and thus save emissions) whilst reducing homeowners’ heating costs.

Most homes are heated using fossil-fuel boilers; of these, gas boilers comprise the vast majority. Switching these boilers for carbon neutral heating solutions will be key to decarbonising our homes.

The GHGS aimed to better insulate homes and replace boilers for 600,000 homes across the UK; the plan was to provide vouchers of up to £10,000 to

homeowners to cover the cost of these works.

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Mind the gap

The GHGS failed to get off the ground because of a lack of green retrofit coordinators in the UK. To match the 2050 ambition, the UK will need 36,000 trained retrofit co-ordinators, but currently there are only 500. That's less than 2% of what's needed.

"So, unsurprisingly", Lamb tells me, "it was almost impossible to get the work done". The green grant scheme, she continues, "has to be stable and long term."

"Instead of this, they've done exactly the opposite. They've gone off in a half-cocked rush and made a big announcement."

"Then it's failed, and they retreated backwards, leaving people and companies who've invested time, money, energy and skills to engage with the scheme. They've been led to feel even more burnt out than before."

The UK government also hopes to swap gas boilers out for heat pumps – installing 600,000 heat pumps a year by 2028 as part of their national infrastructure strategy. However, there are only 950 accredited heat pump installers, versus 96,000 fossil fuel boiler installers.

It'll take skill

The UK government has a stop-start history of committing to providing retrofit grants. If it continues in this vein, will the private and non-profit sectors pick up the slack in funding and training?

"We need that to happen regardless of whether or not central and local governments are playing their part", Lamb says. "Companies need to transform their supply chains"

She suggests that perhaps companies will be driven by lucrative green projects: "Community energy groups give a 4% rate of return. Very often, they're coming up at 3-4%. So I mean, that's more than any banks are giving you at the minute. It's actually a good rate of return."

If not motivated by a 'greater good', or by profit incentives, Lamb sees civil society as the other great pressure point that can move governments and corporations in the right direction.

"Our role in civil society is to help show that there is a public mandate for the difficult, and sometimes serious, long-term investments that will help get us to zero."

"Perhaps COVID has underlined more than ever for people those connections between nature, the climate, our own health and our economy. People have seen the benefits of strong government action, whether it's central or local, which has perhaps strengthened the case for strong government action on climate."

How can civil society bring about change?

"You need to protest, and you need to show the positive living alternative that will inspire people. One alone is never enough. We hope Ashden is highlighting the positive living alternatives that people are creating already."

Lamb feels that investing in training for green jobs is a no-brainer: “It’s not very often you can see a way to create jobs in economies. Most of the time, ministers sit around thinking ‘how on earth am I going to generate jobs?’”

“It’s an opportunity waiting to be grasped.”

Off the back of COVID and the worst economic recession in the G7, investing in green jobs and training is “potentially such a win win win. And yet they keep missing the open goal.”

“COP26 is an extraordinary opportunity for the government”, Lamb concludes. “But they need to grasp it. And time is running out.”

One surefire way to ensure that the UK is a model host for COP26? Coming up with a plan for robust, long-term investments in green jobs and green skills training. To move to a low-carbon society and avoid the worst climate outcomes, we’ll need enough skilled workers to implement our green ambitions.

You can follow Joey on Twitter [here](#).

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