
Chapter 22 – National media coverage

- 22.1 The last two chapters demonstrate the type of information from the public and private sector concerning the NI RHI scheme that could have come to the attention of DETI officials. That information was primarily known to those connected in some way with the scheme itself.
- 22.2 However, it was also the case that, from time to time, stories were published in the UK national media about potential exploitation of RHI. The stories related to the operation of the GB RHI, however they had an obvious general relevance to the NI RHI given the similarities between the two schemes.
- 22.3 There does not seem to have been any reticence on the part of the UK national media about bringing what were said to be the financial advantages of the GB RHI scheme to the attention of the public. The following are examples.
- 22.4 In March 2012 the magazine *Private Eye* published an article about boiler sizing in the GB RHI scheme.¹²⁸⁶ Ofgem was aware of that article, and of the fact that it had been seen by the DECC Minister. The draft of the proposed DETI NI RHI regulations was still under consideration; the NI RHI scheme itself would not be launched for a further 8 months. Ofgem did not tell DETI about the article, and it does not appear to have come to DETI’s attention by any other route.
- 22.5 In May 2013, some 6 months after the NI RHI regulations came into force, the magazine *Farmers Weekly* published an interview with an English farmer who extolled the virtues of installing multiple small boilers to maximise RHI returns.¹²⁸⁷ Ofgem was also aware of this article but did not draw it to DETI’s attention. It also does not appear to have come to DETI’s attention by any other route. The article is dealt with in greater detail at chapter 47 of this Report.
- 22.6 In June 2013 *Private Eye* published a further article about the GB RHI.¹²⁸⁸ It had the headline “Keeping the Lights On”. It began by referencing its article from 2012 when it revealed what it described as a “scam that exploits sloppy Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) legislation”. It referred to the ability, in the context of oversizing of boilers, to “claim far more cash subsidy than was intended”. It set out some of the views expressed on the subject before concluding that “official complacency serves only to line the pockets of cowboy boiler firms and their greedy customers”. The article referred to Ofgem, and the article came to its attention.¹²⁸⁹ It was not provided to DETI, and DETI does not appear to have been alerted to it from any other quarter.
- 22.7 On 10 November 2014 the *Daily Mirror* carried an article entitled “Rich enjoy free fuel AND taxpayer’s cash while millions must choose between heating and eating.” The article referred to biomass boilers attracting Government subsidies for 20 years while the installation paid for itself in five years and quoted one user as reporting that he was expecting £23,000 per annum profit, adding: “The bizarre thing is the more energy you use, the more money it makes you.”¹²⁹⁰ The article went on to quote an installer “We hear of companies installing boilers that are larger

1286 OFG-260435

1287 INQ-100759

1288 OFG-260161

1289 OFG-260156 to OFG 260157

1290 MED-05966 to MED-05970

than required. They leave the boiler running and their windows open.” The report also quoted DECC, responsible for the GB RHI scheme, as saying: “the high tariffs are needed to ‘kick-start’ the renewable energy market but a ‘tiering’ tariff system is in place to deter people from generating excess heat.” The point made by DECC in relation to tiering was of course of critical importance to the NI RHI, which did not have tiering. This article again came to the attention of Ofgem, but was not passed on.¹²⁹¹

22.8 A similar article appeared in *The Guardian* newspaper on 14 January 2015 under the heading “Green biomass boilers may waste billions in public money.”¹²⁹² This article came to the attention of Ofgem, but was not passed on.¹²⁹³

22.9 A further article in *The Guardian* on 23 January 2015,¹²⁹⁴ referencing their article of the previous week, which had drawn attention to wealthy landowners said to be taking advantage of the GB RHI went on to say:

“The rich have been encouraged through amazingly generous incentives to install biomass boilers so inefficient that they don’t meet the official definition of renewable energy, under a scheme which encourages as much waste as possible. The bigger the boiler and the more fuel you burn, the more money you are given. So rich people now run their oversized boilers at full steam, and leave the windows open to cool the house. The returns are astonishing: 20, 30, sometimes 40%.

I’m told there are farmers who have used this incentive to install biomass-fired grain dryers, which would normally operate for just a few weeks a year. But because the scheme pays them to burn wood pellets, they keep the empty dryers running year-round.”¹²⁹⁵

22.10 In the next chapter the Inquiry will examine a very similar message, about heat waste and excessive returns, which DETI did receive about the NI RHI from Janette O’Hagan.

22.11 Unfortunately, DETI appeared to have remained unaware of the reporting in the national media. For instance, in his evidence to the Inquiry, Dr Crawford confirmed he had no recollection of seeing either the *Daily Mirror* or *The Guardian* articles, or having them drawn to his attention.¹²⁹⁶ When these same articles were drawn to the attention of Mr Wightman by the Inquiry he confirmed that he had not seen them before either, despite the existence of the Executive Information Service and centralised Press Office in DETI.¹²⁹⁷

1291 OFG-135819 to OFG-135820

1292 MED-05947 to MED-05951

1293 OFG-135857

1294 MED-05956 to MED-05961

1295 MED-05960

1296 TRA-09883 to TRA-09885; TRA-09945

1297 TRA-10315 to TRA-10320