Greater transparency needed over lobbyist influence on UK renewable energy schemes

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Greater transparency is needed to understand the influence of lobbyists when delivering crucial renewable energy schemes in the UK, new research has claimed.

The comprehensive new study, led by heat policy expert Richard Lowes from the University of Exeter, examined the true extent of how much influence lobbyists still wield to shape Government initiatives.

Richard, a key member of Exeter's prominent Energy Policy group, centred the research around the flagship Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) - a national scheme designed to encourage homes and businesses to switch to renewable and low-carbon heating.

The study found that 'niche actors' - such as lobbyists and campaigners—were the most influential group during the early development stages of the RHI.

The research suggests that strengthening the UK 'Lobbying Act' could provide more visibility, and so more control, over the influence of lobbyists over policy change. The study is published in the journal *Energy Policy*.

Richard, who is based at Exeter's Penryn Campus in Cornwall said: "There are very few UK studies which unpick attempts to influence government policy and even fewer which investigate actual effects on policy change. With so much consumer money and such big issues at

stake, it's important that we know who is affecting Government programmes. Light is often the best disinfectant'.

The RHI scheme, introduced in 2011for non-domestic buildings and in 2014 for homes, is designed to encourage a switch from fossil fuel heating systems to renewable and low-carbon alternatives.

A report by the National Audit Office, published last year on which Richard was an advisor, assessed a number of the scheme's key factors, including value for money, take-up rates and cost-effectiveness. It shows that the scheme has had a small impact on UK carbon emissions and delivered more than 78,000 installations nationwide already in place.

However it concludes that the scheme has not achieved value for money and has not deployed sustainable heat at the expected levels. It also explains that the Government does not have a reliable estimate of the amount it has overpaid participants who have not complied with the regulations, nor the impact of how participants may have 'gamed' the scheme to maximise profits.

In the new study, Richard analysed the power exerted by different groups and influencing agents during the development of the scheme. The research identified a number of fundamental changes made to the policy as it was being developed and showed how individuals and organisations had influenced and attempted to influence the scheme.

It showed that lobbyists and influencers with 'niche' technological expertise or close relationships with policy makers were the most powerful drivers of policy development and change.

Richard added: 'The UK's energy system needs to be transformed and the Government must ensure that this transformation is supported by consumers and not unduly influenced by business interests.

"Strengthening the rules around reporting of lobbying meetings and who lobbyists are would be a pragmatic step and it seems odd and undemocratic to me that nearly all lobbying goes unreported. There should be a legally mandated and publicly accessible central register of all meetings between government officials and politicians with interest groups."

More information: Richard Lowes et al, Policy change, power and the development of Great Britain's Renewable Heat Incentive, *Energy Policy* (2019). DOI: 10.1016/j.enpol.2019.04.041

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