Energy watch

We help a family save more than £250 a year by improving the power efficiency of their home

The Gregsons saved £100 a year by replacing their boiler

Energy-efficient homes can save you money and help the environment. Mike and Hilary Gregson, 44 and 40, from Preston, turned to Which? for help in reducing their energy bills. No problem: our free Switch with Which? (SWW) service, see below, found that a switch from their current supplier Npower to British Gas could save them £160 a year.

But by increasing efficiency and reducing the energy they use, they'll make even greater savings. To find out how much the Gregsons could save, we asked Clive Rushmore from the Energy Saving Trust (EST) to run his expert eye over their home.

Good progress

Since moving in, the Gregsons have already taken some big energy-saving steps. 'We put double glazing in the kitchen and replaced the old bay windows at the front of the house,' said Mike. 'We've also got a new boiler, and when a bulb blows, we replace it with an energy-saving one.'

Double glazing can halve the amount of heat lost through the windows and should always be installed when a window needs replacing. However, EST's Clive Rushmore believes the Gregsons shouldn't rush into getting the whole house double glazed.

'It would be more cost effective to keep the existing single-glazed windows and ensure they're draught proofed,' said Clive.

This definitely adds up. Quotes to double glaze the Gregsons' remaining windows came in at between £7,000 and £8,000. At current energy prices, it could take about 80 years for this to pay off. Good draught-proofing, on the other hand, should cost around £50 and you can expect to recover costs within five years. Inexpensive secondary glazing – usually a piece of clear plastic fixed to the window frame – also reduces heat loss and draughts.

'It was easy to secondary glaze our son's bedroom window – you can really tell the difference and it cost only £60,' said Mike.

Doing the rest of the house will cost around £600, but, with savings of up to £50 a year, this will pay for itself much sooner than conventional double glazing.

Room for improvement

Clive reckons replacing their old boiler with a combination condensing one should save them about £100 a year. He's also happy to see heating controls, such as thermostatic radiator valves and a thermostat, but thinks more can be done. 'Putting shelves over radiators pushes more of the heat into the room,' he explained. 'And fitting foil panels at the back of the radiator will prevent heat loss through the rear wall.'

Clive feels that wall insulation would dramatically reduce their costs. Cavity wall insulation, which is injected into the space between two external walls, would cost the Gregsons about £250, but with reductions in heating bills of around a third, they're likely to see a full return within two years.

VERDICT The Gregsons are doing well. 'They're making good use of energy-saving bulbs,' said Clive. 'And it's good to see no lights left on or appliances on standby.' Using sophisticated modelling software, Clive was able to gauge that if the Gregsons stick to their energy-saving habits, the addition of cavity wall insulation could cut bills by £200 a year. By draught proofing and secondary glazing their windows, they'd boost the saving to about £250.

SWITCH WITH WHICH?

If you feel you are paying over the odds for energy, then SWW? (www.switchwithwhich.co.uk) can almost certainly help you get a cheaper deal. The average saving from SWW? in 2006 was £245.

Checklist

- The EST's free energy check gives advice to help reduce your home's energy consumption. Go to www.est.org.uk/home_ improvements or call 0800 512012.
- Energy-saving bulbs can save you up to £9 annually on your electric bill. Visit Lightbulbs Direct (www.lightbulbs-direct.com) or the Lightbulb Company (www.thelightbulb.co.uk). Look out for our low-energy lightbulbs test in November's *Which?*.
- Most DIY stores should stock secondary-glazing kits, foil radiator panels and draught-proofing materials. And if your hot water cylinder doesn't have a jacket at least 75mm thick, pick one up for around £10 – it will save you twice that a year.
- The government, energy suppliers and local authorities all provide grants for home energy-saving modifications, including loft and cavity wall insulation. Contact the EST for information.

Would you like us to give your finances a makeover? If so, please get in touch with David Pawsey at helpwanted@which.co.uk

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