

Cornwall hamlet using vegetable oil for heating visited by government select committee

A government select committee has visited a small Cornish community to see how vegetable oil is being used to heat homes and other venues.

Kehelland, a hamlet with a primary school and a Methodist church serving as its village hall and local hub, is not connected to the gas main, relying instead on kerosene-powered boilers for heating. But for the past three years a Cornwall-based company has been supplying the community with hydrotreated vegetable oil (HVO) as an alternative fuel for heating.

Family-run firm Mitchell and Webber, which operates across Cornwall, Devon, Somerset, and Dorset, believes alternative liquid fuels for heating should be made more accessible to people living off-grid. HVO is made from waste material similar to cooking oil but it is currently taxed at a higher rate than fossil fuels.

The government is pushing for properties to transition away from their existing heating systems and install new heat pumps – but the owners of Mitchell and Webber, which has been funding the trial, believe renewable heating fuels containing HVO offer a better solution.

Mitchell and Webber started the trial in November 2020 as part of the National Future Ready Fuel project run by industry trade associations UKIFDA and OFTEC. There is no fuel duty on heating kerosene at present, whereas HVO incurs a 10p per litre duty.

“We wanted to showcase a village scenario with a school, a church, and at least 25 homes to demonstrate the scalability of our solution,” said John Wheedon of Mitchell and Webber. “We invited the select committee to witness the success of our trial and to emphasise the need for HVO as a heating and hot water fuel in off-grid gas properties.”

Nigel and Stephanie Uren, who live in Kehelland, have been using HVO in their boiler for more than two years.

They said: “It has been nothing short of wonderful. Unlike the constant noise associated with heat pumps, HVO allows us to run the boiler as needed, providing a quieter environment. Although we’ve explored alternative technologies like heat pumps, the prospect of needing to install three-phase electricity presents a significant hurdle.”

Kehelland School is the only school in the UK using this type of renewable fuel for heating. Headteacher Ellie Watkins said the school is constrained by budgets and other technologies would be too expensive.

“While we actively teach our students to contribute to environmental preservation, we can proudly assert that as a school, we are effectively reducing our carbon emissions and practising what we preach,” she said.

Mitchell and Webber is now hoping to engage further with the government in a bid to highlight the benefits of HVO.

“We would greatly appreciate further engagement with ministers and officials from the department, and we extend an invitation for them to visit Cornwall,” added Robert Wheedon of Mitchell and Webber.

“This visit would offer an opportunity to observe first hand how our initiatives operate and to hear directly from the residents themselves.”

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