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Baxi Roundtable Explores Barriers and Enablers to Heat Decarbonisation in Care Sector

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A roundtable event hosted by heating and hot water solutions provider Baxi welcomed representatives from government and industry to discuss the challenges and opportunities surrounding the decarbonisation of heat in care homes.

The roundtable was used to highlight the results of a recent Baxi research report. This summer, Baxi carried out a survey of over 400 care home managers followed by an industry-led focus group to understand their attitudes towards decarbonising heat in their buildings. The subsequent report analyses the implications of the findings and includes Baxi's policy recommendations.

94% of the care home managers surveyed expect to have a budget for decarbonisation. However, the research highlighted a number of barriers the sector needs to overcome in order to deliver its decarbonisation ambitions:

- Access to funding
- The need for technical advice and guidance on funding
- Procurement and installation
- Cost and affordability
- The spark gap between electricity and gas prices and ongoing running costs

The roundtable event took place in Westminster and was hosted by Jeff House, Baxi's Director of External Affairs and Policy. It was attended by a panel of industry experts, giving them the opportunity to share their perspectives on the enablers needed to decarbonise heat in the care sector. The UK's population of over 85s is set to double between now and 2050, leading to increased demand for care services. With typical public and private sector settings requiring around-the-clock heat, the panel was invited to discuss the pressing need for action in the nation's approximately 17,000 care homes.

Taking part in the discussion were Paul Chambers, Deputy Director of the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme at the Government's Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ); Nik Smith, Managing Director of specialist renewable energy contractor, Oakes Energy Services; Richard Hilson, Principal Consultant, Health and Sustainability, at technology and data consultancy, Talan; and Andy Green, Head of Technical Solutions at Baxi.

The discussion began with a recap of Baxi's research report, which revealed the opportunity for retrofit, with the majority of survey respondents operating buildings less than 10 years old. This, coupled with the fact that 42% of care homes rely on fossil-fuel based heating, was said to present an opportunity for the sector to consider heating system upgrades. These upgrades would have a significant impact on reducing a home or estate's carbon emissions.

The concerns raised by panellists and attendees, which included government representatives, industry stakeholders, customers, and media, echoed the report's findings and highlighted a shared commitment to overcoming barriers to decarbonisation. Among the most prominent barriers discussed by the group was the spark gap. The UK's high electricity costs were said to offer little OPEX incentive for those care home operators interested in upgrading gas boilers to replace with an air source heat pump system.

Legacy challenges from poorly installed and operated heat pumps in commercial buildings, including the care sector, were also highlighted. Common issues, including on-site teams operating heat pumps incorrectly and a failure to commission heat pumps optimally, prompted the proposal of a standard for the commercial sector. The group agreed that such a standard could be akin to MCS in the domestic sector, or PAS in the insulation sector and would be key to improving design and installation practices. It was suggested that this, combined with a focus on quick wins like pipework lagging and switching to a low temperature heating system, could help care operators to achieve optimal gains in energy efficiency and decarbonisation.

The panel also took the opportunity to discuss the heating system upgrade of a hypothetical 60-bed care home. While the upgrade of a boiler to a fully electric heat pump system was identified as a significant carbon saver, in the absence of more attractive electricity tariffs higher operational costs were reported as a major obstacle. A hybrid system with a heat pump delivering 60% of the heating output and a boiler contributing the remaining 40% was acknowledged as a potentially viable option. This system would be capable of providing significant carbon savings while maintaining running cost neutrality.

Despite the success of the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme to date, the absence of any further funding is a core challenge that the group identified. Many of the panellists agreed this places extra emphasis on the need for reformed electricity tariffs and partnerships such as Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) and Power Purchase Agreements (PPAs).

Reflecting on the roundtable, Jeff House said: "The performance of the care sector is vitally important, not

least because it will touch all of us at some point in our lives. Finding ways to help the sector to manage its energy usage, especially when it comes to heat, is therefore in everyone's best interests.

"While the results of our research report made many of the challenges facing the care operators clear, the roundtable gave us a valuable opportunity to discuss some of the nuances of the sector in detail. There's no question that addressing the spark gap and introducing focused government funding will help significantly, but those on our panel recognised that we can all play our part in driving change too. By keeping this dialogue going and doing everything we can to support the sector in best practice around energy efficient heating, we can put some foundations in place while we wait for enhanced government support."

The full findings of Baxi's research report can be downloaded here.