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News

# Solar-powered schools 'penalised' with higher tax

Lucy Bannerman

Environmentally friendly schools with solar panels on their roof will have to pay hundreds of pounds extra under changes to business rates. But academies, free schools or private schools with the same type of panels will get relief, because of their charitable status.

Philip Hammond, the chancellor, is facing further pressure to soften the reforms after complaints from high street businesses this week that they will face a sharp rise in charges.

"It's absolutely bonkers," said Sarah Ewins, business manager of Eleanor Palmer primary school in Camden,

north London, where pupils organised cake bakes and other events last year to raise £24,000 for the panels. Instead of reducing energy bills, Ms Ewins said that the panels would now cost an extra £500 in addition to the £4,000 increase to the school's rates bill. "If you're a state school with solar panels you have to pay but, if you're a private school, you don't. That's absolutely mad," she said.

"The kids worked so hard last year, doing cake sales, organising film nights, even giving up their Saturdays to raise money for these panels. It seems a crying shame we should be penalised for trying to show a good example."

The government has accused critics

of scaremongering over the changes to business rates, which come into effect in April. It says that three quarters of businesses will have no change or reductions to their rates.

Premises with solar panels are now divided into two categories: those that export their solar power, such as large solar farms, and those that store it for their own use. Rates will fall in most cases for the first group but the second, which includes many public sector buildings such as schools, councils and hospitals, will face a rise in solar panel rates of up to 700 per cent.

According to the Solar Trade Association, the rateable value for self-use

solar panels will rise from £8 per kilowatt to up to £61.60.

Campaigners said it was "bewildering" that the government should seek to penalise groups using clean energy to reduce their electricity bills. Leonie Greene, of the Solar Trade Association, said: "The proposed tax hike on solar is bewildering and completely at odds with the government's new industrial strategy. Rooftop solar is an ideal means for schools, hospitals and businesses to reduce their energy costs while doing their bit for the environment."

Nina Schrank, energy campaigner at Greenpeace UK, said: "By penalising these people, ministers could stop the

solar industry in its tracks before it even gets going."

A spokesman for the Department for Communities and Local Government said: "A range of factors were considered in rating state schools for business rates purposes, including any improvements to buildings, and they are seeing an average 2 per cent fall in business rates, equivalent to £16 million a year. All ratepayers can be confident that our £3.6 billion transitional relief scheme will protect them from large increases in the business rates bill of the overall property."

Ed Conway, page 26  
Michael Gove, page 27

FRANK AUGSTEIN/AP