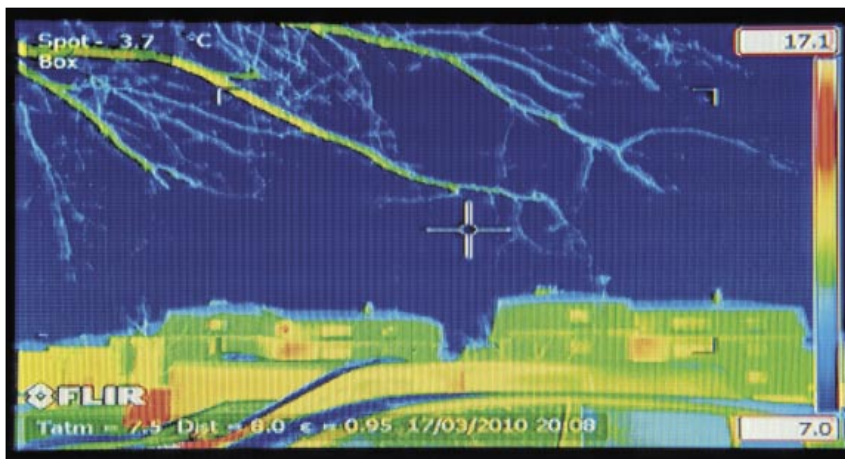




Avi Karia, left, and Paul Martin, right, from Heatseekers with, Cllr Malcom Greer, Cabinet member for Regeneration PD1686371



Thermal image determining if houses in the Park Wood area losing too much heat

They seek heat here, they seek it there, soon everywhere

Not many occupations - unless you're a vampire - involve not going out until sundown, but if you're a Heatseeker, it's the only time to go out.

Angela Cole met the team who emerge after dark to catch on camera what the rest of us can't see.

IT'S only a small van, but crammed inside the Heatseekers' vehicle is enough technology to take 500 images an hour of heat seeping out of homes across Maidstone.

The pilot project with Maidstone council, identifying which homes need a hand keeping the heat in, will potentially cut Co2 emissions across the borough, while also saving people hundreds of pounds on their utility bills.

With the use of a thermal imaging camera, the thermographers working for Heatseekers can spot where the warmth is escaping, from the tiniest gap around a window frame, to heat pouring from a radiator through a thin outside wall.

The council, one of the first in the country to do so, teamed up with the Mark Group and Energy Savings Partnership to survey homes in two areas, Boxley and Park Wood, and pinpoint which ones are in

need of help to insulate their homes better.

Cllr Malcolm Greer (Con), cabinet member for regeneration, said: "We are right in the frontline of this. There are grants for people to help them get the insulation done. In areas such as Park Wood there is only a certain amount of disposable income, so I would far prefer that they (residents) are spending on looking after their families than pumping money into the utility companies.

"This is a dual function because there will be savings on Co2 emissions as well. Eventually we hope to roll this out across the borough."

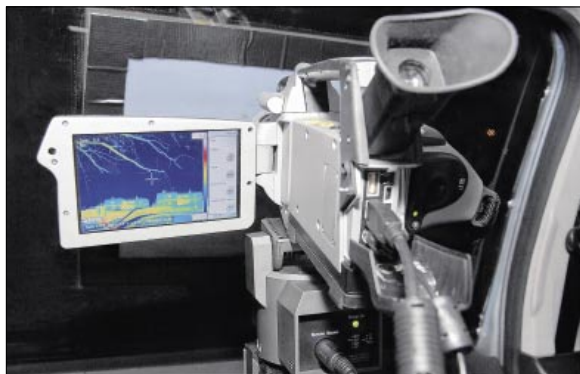
So far 20,000 houses, mainly built in the 1960s to 1980s, have been surveyed in Boxley and Park Wood.

In the next few weeks people whose homes were shown to need extra insulation will be able to see their personalised "thermal report".

Householders will be shown colour pictures taken by the thermal imaging camera. They range from blues and blacks, where heat isn't escaping, to orange, red and white - although the top end of the spectrum isn't seen often (except at Christmas, when decorations made homes glow bright red).

As Dawn Morley, service delivery manager, says: "If you see a house that's red, there's got to be something desperately wrong. You probably need to look and see if it's on fire!"

"It's absolutely fascinating what a thermal imaging



The imaging camera scans houses in Park Wood

camera can tell you. But it is non-invasive, and it can't see through glass."

Thermographers Avi Karia and Paul Martin have seen some interesting images of wildlife, but their timings of sundown to 11pm for collecting images has meant the streets are often deserted.

The reason for their nocturnal schedule, driving their vehicle at 10-12 miles per hour, taking images from the roadside, is that

daytime temperatures need to cool down to allow for perfect pictures. They can take up 4,000 images a night, which they review the following day.

Most of the images in Maidstone were taken during the cold snap, when the use of home heating was at its height. More images will be taken around the borough this autumn, with the survey of the town due for completion in 2011.

Factfile

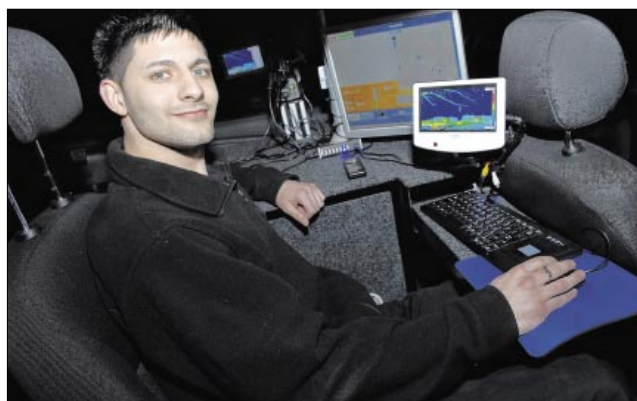
THE temperature must be below 8C to be able to capture an image.

The thermal imaging camera can't see through walls or windows. Trained thermographers operate the equipment and review heat loss from properties.

There are grants available if householders want to have the cavity wall insulation installed, particularly for the over

70s or if you are in receipt of certain benefits. Trained advisors will be able to show householders the picture of their property and advise on energy savings options. The vehicles operate between October and March.

Older homes, of solid wall construction, which aren't suitable for cavity wall insulation, will not be included in the survey.



Avi Karia, using the in-car computers linked to the thermal imaging cameras Pictures: Matthew Reading PD1686369

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