



EPEC: Suggested topics for small grants

November 2020

1 Overarching principles

The FPRN welcomes research that, where appropriate, prioritises exploration of lived experiences of energy poverty and which enables knowledge transfer between research, policy and practice. We also welcome proposals which focus on hard to reach and/or under-represented groups in an energy context (i.e. according to tenure, age, geography, household type and structure, and health and wellbeing).

We also recommend that potential applicants consult the [2019 Fuel Poverty Temperature Take report](#) prior to developing their proposals. This provides an overview of gaps in the evidence base regarding fuel poverty. We welcome proposals that respond to gaps in the evidence base.

2 Suggested topics

We welcome proposals relating to the following research themes determined by the FPRN Committee and associates. Proposals do not have to respond to these themes as long as their primary focus is on or related to fuel or energy poverty or relates more broadly to our understanding of the relationships between people, energy and the built environment, and demonstrates originality.

Fuel Poverty and Society

- **Fuel poverty and other forms of deprivation.** New streams of research and policy are beginning to explore wider experiences of deprivation and poverty and the connections between these, which includes fuel poverty. The connection between fuel poverty and transport poverty, for instance, is one such burgeoning agenda. We welcome proposals that aim to explore the connections between different forms of deprivation (i.e. fuel, food, furniture, period poverty), particularly those focused on the everyday realities (i.e. lived experiences) for households and those seeking to better understand holistic mechanisms for identifying and appropriately targeting and designing support. We also welcome proposals seeking to examine this within the context of 'poverty fragmentation' which considers the appropriateness of separate and distinct representations and responses to forms of poverty.

- **COVID-19 and fuel poverty:** The COVID-19 pandemic and policy responses to it have had a dramatic impact on public health, the economy and social relations. It has exacerbated the hardship experienced by fuel poor households, e.g. due to lockdown, and is likely to increase fuel poverty risk substantially due to the expected increase in economic insecurity, mass redundancies and further waves coinciding with higher winter fuel bills. We welcome proposals that explore existing responses to the pandemic and lockdown, ranging from individual households, frontline services, energy and related sectors, policy initiatives, e.g. supporting those at risk of self-disconnection and in energy debt, and potential lessons for future policy and practice. We would also welcome proposals that investigate whether the pandemic has brought new groups of households into fuel poverty (the 'new fuel poor'); whether the anticipated long term rise in home working will affect lower income households as well as the better off and if so, its implications for energy affordability; and the potential opportunities that the current focus on health can provide for a step change towards integrated policy on housing and health.
- **Digital exclusion and fuel poverty:** Covid-19 has accelerated the widespread trend of access to government, local government, utility and other services requiring digital confidence and often access to high speed broadband. Many advice providers have similarly moved services to online and remote access out of necessity. We welcome proposals that explore the impact of the digital divide on the fuel poor and other energy consumers in vulnerable circumstances. For example, research in this area might focus on: how barriers to accessing digital services and advice might be addressed; are there any practical initiatives perhaps at a local level that attempt to tackle this problem and if so, what are the lessons for national policy and practice?
- **Social innovation to tackle energy poverty:** Sitting between policy and civil society initiatives, the social innovation sector is noted for developing and delivering solutions to particular aspects of energy poverty, often that reflect challenges in specific contexts. Often, they provide very practical interventions that quickly improve the lives of people in energy poverty - a case in point being a rental scheme that places high-efficiency appliances in low-income households, reducing their energy bills. A key aim of social innovation is to demonstrate the efficacy and scale-up potential of approaches such that they attract private investors or are taken up by government or civil society. Establishing links between the academic and social innovation communities could help measure the impact of such projects, boosting their chances for scale-up.
- **Energy poverty in black and minority communities:** In the United States, it is well known that black and minority customers have higher energy bills due to low-quality housing and are often charged higher tariffs thus facing higher disconnection rates. Reporting by the Energy News Network suggested there is a 'wilful blindness' on the part of utilities that argue they do not have sufficiently granular data to assess whether their practices are discriminatory. Investigating whether similar situations exist within Europe would be useful, particularly as the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) has set a precedent of upholding the right to equal treatment in relation to the delivery of energy services across all communities, following a [case of discrimination against Roma and migrant communities in Bulgaria](#).

Fuel Poverty and Policy

- **Making fuel poverty a policy priority:** The negative impact of cold homes on health and the savings in health budgets by investing in energy efficient homes are well researched, but this does not always translate into policies and investment. What factors make fuel poverty a policy priority in some areas/ countries but not in others? We welcome proposals aimed at understanding and evidencing what turns fuel poverty from a social concern into a priority for effective and sustained policy responses and investment.
- **Decarbonisation and fuel poverty:** Decarbonisation and net zero policies will have a dramatic impact on all households, with many key decisions needing to take place within the next few years. There are many references to making sure that the transition is just and fair but there is less clarity about what this means in practice. We welcome proposals that focus on the implications for the fuel poor of the various low carbon technologies - and support mechanisms for such technologies; how equity, participation and consumer acceptability might be hard-wired into transition policies; whether new models of paying for energy, energy services and energy efficiency can help address fuel poverty; and the lessons existing exemplar local initiatives to address net zero and fuel poverty simultaneously might provide for wider practice.

Fuel Poverty, Home and Neighbourhood

- **Homes and health:** The negative impact of fuel poverty and cold homes on health and wellbeing has received significant attention in policy and research. Yet, the problem persists, and in many ways is worsening. In 2019, record levels of excess winter deaths were recorded and, against the backdrop of Covid-19, the connection between health issues, such as respiratory conditions and mental health, and the places we live and work have been brought into the spotlight. We welcome proposals that seek to examine aspects of the relationship between energy, health, and wellbeing – whether considering new domains (i.e. energy and health in lockdown) or building on established streams of past work.
- **Nature and retrofit:** The necessary increase in the retrofitting of existing homes to improve their energy efficiency provides a key means of reducing domestic carbon emissions. However, some measures, particularly those aimed at improving air tightness may have unintended consequences for wildlife, most notably certain types of birds, bats and insects. If neighbourhoods with a high prevalence of fuel poverty are to be (rightly) prioritised for energy efficiency improvements then these communities risk becoming nature depleted with consequences for wellbeing and the sense of connection to nature amongst local residents. We welcome proposals focussed on better understanding the impacts of retrofit and indeed, new build housing design, on wildlife and/or which considers affordable, pragmatic and solutions to these problems which can be rolled out alongside retrofit campaigns.
- **Fuel poverty, decarbonising homes and indoor air quality:** Cutting carbon emissions from home heating is imperative and urgent. Making homes more airtight helps to achieve this by reducing heating demand, but effective ventilation is essential to ensure healthy air quality. However, the risk of poor ventilation in airtight homes may be compounded for households experiencing energy poverty. For example, ventilation equipment may be switched off to save on electricity bills or the home may be under ventilated to conserve heat. We welcome proposals aimed at better understanding the intersection between decarbonising homes, ventilation and energy costs.

- **Addressing financing gaps for retrofit projects:** The European Green Deal calls for a Renovation Wave that includes specific measures to improve the energy efficiency of low-income households, and has set substantial budgets to support such efforts. An overarching challenge is that EU funds typically support large-scale projects while renovating homes is about small budgets (EUR 20k) for millions of individual projects, the vast majority of which will be carried out by small businesses that would also have trouble qualifying for EU-level funding. Research on effective schemes could support replication by other entities.
- **Fuel poverty beyond the home:** Research into the lived experiences of fuel poverty has highlighted how spending time in 'third spaces' (i.e. those beyond the home or workplace) such as cafes, libraries, community centres, parks, and on public transport is a central part of the coping strategies employed by many of those living in cold homes that are unaffordable to heat. Lockdowns linked to Covid-19 have, in some cases, severed or limited access to these spaces for fuel poor households. We welcome proposals focussed on better understanding the ways in which geographies of fuel poverty extend beyond the home; the role that third spaces play in mitigating the worst effects of fuel poverty; what happens when access is prohibited (whether by lockdown or due to wider factors such as privatisation); and developing policy recommendations in this area.