

Prototyping Fuel Poverty Alleviation Policies with Housing Association Professionals



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Rationale

While the body of scholarship on how to measure fuel poverty has grown rapidly, the application of this information in practice has received less attention. Additionally, while a significant share of households in fuel poverty live in social housing estates across Western Europe, the role of housing associations in addressing this issue remains overlooked in 'just transitions' research. This project addresses these research gaps, by proactively engaging with various housing association professionals across Europe to find out how qualitative and quantitative knowledge on fuel poverty can inform alleviation strategies in different policy contexts, with a specific focus on its role in retrofit decision-making. The research consisted of six focus groups with representatives from housing associations in France, the UK, and the Netherlands.

Key research aims

The key research aim was to contribute to knowledge transfer in the broadest sense: within academia, between research and practice and among housing associations. Additionally, the research aimed:

1. To start the discussion on why fuel poverty is perceived as a 'policy priority' in one context (department or housing association) but not, or less so, in others.
2. To help foster understanding of the practical and regulatory obstacles housing associations face when integrating fuel poverty statistics in their retrofit strategies.

Summary of research activity

The research on energy poverty in dwellings rented out by housing associations was conducted in France, England, and the Netherlands. Six major social housing providers were selected in each country for participation. Focus groups were held in the fourth quarter of 2022 with 42 participants from these providers, representing diverse backgrounds and perspectives. Thematic coding analysis was used to identify effective approaches to address energy poverty. The desirability and feasibility of each approach were assessed by the participants based on perceived benefits and potential obstacles.

Methodologies

Qualitative research design, focus groups, thematic coding analysis.



Focus group organised at Polylogis offices in France (top) and at Clarion offices in England (bottom)

Findings

Together with two co-authors, I conducted focus groups with social housing professionals from France, England, and the Netherlands to understand their perceptions relating to, and use of, targeted approaches in mitigating energy poverty among tenants. Our study explored various strategies, identified barriers faced by these professionals, and examined their role in addressing both short-term energy price spikes and the long-term transition to energy-efficient housing for tenants. The results provide valuable insights, showing that participants generally have a favourable view of targeted approaches, but they also acknowledge the pros and cons of different strategies, with data accuracy being a major challenge.

Crisis Measures Mitigating Energy Poverty

- During the autumn of 2022, the energy price crisis led to a strengthened sense of urgency and awareness among social housing providers (SHPs) about energy poverty. Several participants mentioned the sudden emergence of energy poverty has “woken us up”. While British SHPs had already developed policies on this issue, most Dutch and French participants were relatively new to the concept.
- In France, SHPs enforced the national ‘Energy Sobriety Plan’, set temperature limits, enhanced thermal insulation, and individualised heating costs to combat energy poverty.
- In the Netherlands, SHPs implemented quick interventions like LED lighting and radiator foils and considered developing communal heated spaces for tenant comfort in the future.
- In England, SHPs distributed energy and food vouchers, offered energy advice support, and temporarily absorbed price increases to assist tenants.

Housing Allocation

- In all three countries, participants supported the idea of targeted (re)allocation of rental dwellings based on energy poverty risks.
- In France, allocation decisions are already somewhat influenced by energy costs, but participants saw merit in further targeting based on household characteristics. There are however limitations due to formal housing allocation rules and potential privacy regulations.
- In England, participants favoured avoiding the allocation of low-income households to energy inefficient housing. Locational preferences of house seekers and the mismatch between low-income tenants and energy-inefficient housing limit the effectiveness of targeted allocation: “A house is also a home. It is not a commodity that can easily be changed.” In a way, a dual crisis emerged, when the housing shortage makes it exceedingly difficult to allocate energy-efficient homes to individuals facing energy poverty.
- In the Netherlands, participants suggested stimulating ‘empty nesters’ to move to smaller, more energy-efficient dwellings. Targeted allocation is feasible when data is reliable, but the current system prioritises low-income households in low-rent dwellings, which may not be energy-efficient.

Rent Setting

- There was limited support for targeted rent setting across all countries as it provides temporary relief but does not solve the energy poverty problem structurally. Targeted rent setting does not directly influence tenants’ energy expenditure and may not guarantee spending on energy costs.

- In France, one option discussed included rewarding energy-saving efforts with rent reductions. Data limitations and complex housing allocation rules hinder further targeting.
- In England and the Netherlands, targeted rent setting faces challenges due to existing housing allowance regulations and potential reduction in SHP revenues: “Dropping them further doesn’t really achieve anything, particularly for anyone on housing benefits, because it gets covered anyway.” Furthermore, the current housing allocation systems are not aligned with targeted rent setting for energy poverty.

Prioritised Renovation

- SHPs recognise the advantages of prioritising retrofitting in areas with a high prevalence of energy poverty. However, SHPs already have long-term investment models based on maintenance cycles, limiting the feasibility of prioritisation.
- Concerns exist about discordance with social diversity objectives and rapid tenant turnover in France. Voluntary tenant participation and data limitations pose other challenges.
- In England, the necessity of prioritising deteriorated properties to reduce long-term costs was emphasised. One participant noted: “It just depends how long you model it over. If you’re talking 30 or 60 years, you’re still going to incur that cost at some point therefore you might as well deal with the residents that need it most at the beginning.”
- Dutch SHPs see potential in targeted ‘fix teams’ to address energy poverty temporarily.
- Findings on Targeted Information Campaigns:
- Participants agree on the necessity of tailored information for tenants at risk of energy poverty.
- In France, tenant agency is limited due to collective heating systems. Behavioural interventions are feasible but face challenges with tenant agency and data limitations.
- English SHPs feel a moral obligation to offer assistance and are also motivated by potential property deterioration. They engage in diverse forms of financially- and energy-related assistance.
- Dutch participants emphasise the importance of insights into consumption and behavioural changes. They believe targeted information campaigns are crucial and can be effective with face-to-face interactions and community engagement.

Recommendations

- Our study highlights the need for institutional changes that align prevailing housing policies with the objective of addressing energy poverty among social housing tenants. Currently, regulations primarily focus on rents as the main housing cost, overlooking the significant impact of energy costs on tenants’ financial burden. We recommend that, in order to better tackle energy poverty, housing policies consider total housing costs, including energy costs. Further research should explore the practical implementation of these changes.
- There is a need for further investigation into the distribution of responsibilities among stakeholders, including governments and social housing providers, in order to establish an effective collaborative response to energy poverty. Our findings suggest that social housing providers are willing to assist tenants through retrofitting initiatives and behavioural coaching, but that there is a need, in future studies, to explore the optimal balance of responsibilities.

- Additional research is necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of behaviour change interventions and to develop strategies for engaging those tenants who face barriers, such as language limitations or digital illiteracy.
- Improved data availability is essential for enhancing the effectiveness of the described interventions. Governments and/or social housing providers should invest in data collection and analysis, and institutional support is crucial to facilitate this process.

Outputs

1. Submitted article to the peer-reviewed journal 'Building Research & Information'.
2. A policy brief specifically tailored for housing associations, which will be distributed both in print and online, will receive special attention during the autumn conference of the European Federation for Living in Belfast, Northern Ireland.
3. Public seminar with academic and non-academic participants through the network of the umbrella organisation for social housing providers Housing Europe, followed by a fruitful discussion, which can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zpOJ5jNDEWY&t=2671s>

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About the Funder

The [Fuel Poverty Research Network](#) (FPRN) was established in 2016 by researchers who were all concerned with different aspects of the interaction between people, homes and energy. The charity supports researchers and facilitates dialogue between researchers, policy and practice. FPRN's grant programme, Engaging in Energy Poverty in Early Career (EPEC), supports early career researchers (ECRs), postgraduate students (PGRs), and early career practitioners (ECPs) based in any country to contribute to efforts to tackle fuel and energy poverty through original research and publication.



Cover image: Focus group organised at Paris Habitat offices in France