Fuel Poverty (also known as ‘Energy Poverty’) is acknowledged to be a serious and widespread issue in the UK, with estimates of the number of households affected rising from 1.2 million in 2004 to 4 million in 2009. This problem is increasingly recognised in other European countries, and in the face of widespread financial crisis many households have to make tough decisions about their priorities. In her report on social housing in the European Union, MEP Karima Delli indicates that the numbers affected by fuel poverty in the European Union might be as many as 50-125 million.

Fuel Poverty affects the most vulnerable in our society. It happens when households on low incomes live in energy inefficient homes, so that the cost of the energy required to provide their basic needs is unaffordable. The rising costs of energy are a significant contributory factor, as is the ever-growing range of household, communications and entertainment equipment that consume electricity – but most significant is generally the thermal efficiency of the home and the equipment for heating or cooling and hot water. Households particularly at risk of fuel poverty are those with young children, the elderly, or living with a long term illness or disability, as well as the long term unemployed – all of whom tend to be in the home for longer hours than average. In some cases there may also be less ability to cope with uncomfortable or inadequate temperatures, or a need for more hot water for washing and laundry.

The effects of fuel poverty and low (or too high) indoor temperatures include fuel debt, poor health and even death. In a cold country, lower indoor temperatures increase the risk to occupants of impaired respiratory and cardiovascular function, with children living in cold homes more than twice as likely to suffer from a respiratory problem than those with adequate heating. Mental health can be negatively affected, the frequency of minor illnesses such as colds increased, and conditions such as arthritis exacerbated. Indirect effects include lower education attainment, reduced dietary choices, social exclusion and the risk of trips and falls due to lowered dexterity.

In Gloucestershire, in the South West of England, the Severn Wye Energy Agency joined forces in 2001 with the local and health authorities, community and third sector groups, to form a strategic Affordable Warmth Partnership. The group has kept the issues high on the local political agenda since then, and overseen the Warm and Well programme, delivered by the Severn Wye Energy Agency, in making energy efficiency improvements to over 40,000 local homes to date. This is supported by a free energy advice service, which receives over 10,000 telephone calls a year and targets outreach to the most vulnerable households, working with frontline health and social care services and community networks, as well as targeting areas of multiple deprivation.

The indications are that similar initiatives are developing at local and regional level in many other EU Member States to tackle fuel poverty, with local and regional stakeholders already leading the way in implementation. Actions are wide-ranging, including awareness-raising for behavioural changes, detailed advice and home energy surveys, replacing older inefficient equipment or appliances, programmes of thermal insulation, financial support for building energy measures, organising competition between energy suppliers, joint energy purchasing…

FEDARENE supports Mrs Karima Deli who calls on the Commission to adopt a Communication on Combating Energy Poverty that urges the Member States to introduce a definition of energy poverty based on common parameters, but adjusted for each Member State to take into account the specific national context, with targeted financial schemes to reduce energy costs for the most vulnerable households.
Rising energy bills, squeezed incomes and colder springs. Put these alongside our slow progress in insulating homes more efficiently, and it is a recipe for systemic fuel poverty.

2011 figures reveal that 9.8% of households across the European Union could not afford to heat their home. In an age when we can harness the power of the sun to heat our water or our homes, it is a travesty that such a high number of people are forced to choose between food or warmth.

Some critics argue that the rising energy bills are down to the policies of the EU and national governments to ‘green’ our energy companies. Yes, the government has had to ensure energy companies invest in insulating our homes, yes energy companies are having to spend more on infrastructure as we make the switch to greener energy. Yet energy companies continue to make soaring profits, whilst hiking energy bills.

As we rely more and more on Russian gas, critical energy supplies at winter time will become more volatile. Diversity must be at the heart of Europe’s future energy supply. The ‘eggs all in one basket’ approach, based on long distance access to Eastern European gas as the North Sea runs dry is fraught with danger. If Russian President Putin desires to divert attention away from a domestic crisis, or once again falls out of love with his Ukrainian neighbours, turning off the gas taps could leave Western Europe short of supplies within 30 days. Having such an unstable resource in the future could lead to greater fluctuations in gas prices. This would leave consumers having to prepare for wild increases in their bills, straining household budgets.

As a Liberal Democrat, I believe in the power of community. In my own constituency of South West England, fuel sharing schemes have been created in a number of counties to tackle rising fuel bills. In Somerset, a community oil scheme has helped residents reliant on heating oil to save thousands of pounds on bills. Schemes such as this, replicated across Europe, could be the silver bullet. Communities coming together to ‘bulk buy’ fuel in an effort to cut down on bills, sharing the load.

Similar work is also being done with solar energy. I visited one such scheme in the central Devon town of Crediton last year, where social housing tenants were able to buy into a bulk purchase of solar panels, cutting down the cost of installation as well as future bills. I predict we will see much more of this in future. But only if local councils, backed by national and international action across Europe, can raise awareness.

In Gloucestershire Severn Wye Energy Agency has been a pioneer in leading community action to fight fuel poverty. Action at supranational level has been slow. The European Parliament has for a number of years been pressing Member States to define fuel poverty. I’m proud to say the United Kingdom was one of the first to do so. But the European Union does have a role to play in the fight to end fuel poverty. As national and local government tackle the social problems that also contribute to fuel poverty, alongside their own national energy policies, Europe can be investing in continental wide infrastructure.

Sharing must be the buzz word to combat fuel poverty and secure the energy supplies we need to warm our homes in the future. Sharing the burden as well as the means to a solution. At all levels, from town halls to Brussels, we have a responsibility to ourselves, our children and our planet.
The Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur Region is one of the French Regions most affected by fuel poverty. Paradoxically, despite its sunny location, it is the second region in France where residents say they suffer from the cold the most. About 700,000 households spend more than 10% of their revenues on energy for their homes. Overall, Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur inhabitants spend on average €1087 annually to meet their energy needs. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the fact that more than half the inhabitants have their heating system running on electricity (62% versus 52% on average in France), which has seen the highest rise in price amongst all fuels.

In order to combat this phenomenon, which mainly affects active youths in old urban centres and elderly people in rural houses, the Region today supports several flagship projects on its territory. It participates with the CEDER (Centre for the environment and the development of renewable energy sources) and the Vaucluse County Council in the definition of a ‘Social fund for energy management measures’ (FSATME) in the north of the County. This Social fund complements State national aid to families in fuel poverty situations to fund small measures to improve their habitat. Similarly, the Region, with the help of an association of builders in the Var County, organised a housing auto-rehabilitation programme which involves the concerned inhabitants whilst recreating social ties. This helps create a deeper and more long-term involvement of these people in the upkeep of their homes.

Another programme is the “Appliances Replacement Fund” (FARAE) to help replace the most energy-consuming household appliances with more energy-efficient ones.

Finally, to enable exchanges between different stakehold-

ers, the Region finances a network “Regional Fuel Poverty” (RREP) whose mission is to facilitate the sharing of experiences, dissemination of good practices and the transmission of knowledge to any structure wishing to engage in operations to combat fuel poverty.

Valentin LYANT, vlyant@REGIONPACA.FR

ENERGY SAVINGS CHECKS FOR LOW INCOME HOUSEHOLDS

For households with low income it is one about financial exist-
ence and a secure livelihood – or to put it simple: it is a ques-
tion about whether you can pay your bills, switch on the light and stay warm in winter.

Manifold attempts are being made in European countries to tackle the problem of fuel poverty. Most often, households with low income lack not only the capital to invest in energy or water saving technologies but the knowledge on the rational use of energy and water. The European project ‘Energy-Check for Low Income Households – EC-LINC’, supported by Intelligent Energy – Europe programme and coordinated by Berlin Energy Agency (BEA), motivates and enables people with low income to live more energy-efficiently by applying no-cost or low-cost measures.

Pilot projects in Berlin, Berchem (Antwerp), Budapest and Vi-
enna advise these households on changing their consumer behaviour. In addition, small energy and water saving devices are installed for free. In Berlin, for example, BEA and the Berlin branch of the Roman Catholic social service organisation Caritas (DIeV) cooperate with the cooperative building company GESOBau, which is co-financing the project and which has launched Germany’s largest refurbishment project by modernising 13,000 homes until 2015 in Märkisches Viertel in the north of Berlin. In the course of the pilot project, energy savings advisors are consulting 1,700 low income households in the refurbished housing stock.

The energy savings advisors are long-term unemployed people trained by a professional energy advisor and receive social and technical mentoring by DICV Berlin and BEA. Thus, consultations are carried out at eye level and the advisors themselves can improve their chances on the labour market.

The households receive a guide on energy-efficient liv-
ing in the modernised home, a temperature and humidity ‘check card’, other energy saving devices and a house-
hold report. Experience has shown that, on average, a consultation can save households as much as 200 euros on energy costs per year.

FUEL POVERTY IN BULGARIA

People who live in fuel poverty usually have few social support groups and means to get access to professional and financial assistance. In this sense, handicapped people living in fuel poverty are a particularly hard target group to reach in the efforts to tackle fuel poverty across Europe. This is so because handicapped people have even fewer social contacts and opportunities than most other people in society.

For this reason, the ACHIEVE project in Bulgaria, supported by the Intelligent Energy – Europe programme, pays particu-
lar attention to involving handicapped people.

The Bulgarian partner in the project – Energy Agency of Plov-
div – cooperates closely with the Union of Handicapped Peo-
ple and its associated member organization “For Decent Life” to identify households of handicapped people who live in fuel poverty. The cooperation with the two organizations has been very successful and as a result multiple households of handi-
capped people have been reached by the project.

Valent

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IN BRIEF

BELFAST ILLUMINATES

The City Hall is one of seven European buildings chosen to take part in the EU’s ILLUMINATE pilot sites, which will see new solid state lighting systems installed on other landmarks such as the world famous waterfront in Genoa but also the Genoa Aquarium, CretAquarium, Rotterdam Zoo, Lithuanian Sea Museum and Experimentarium DK.

The revolutionary system employs 433 light fittings – each of which can be individually controlled, meaning that the City Hall can be illuminated by up to 16 million different colour options. It is estimated that the system also will save around €16,400 on the Council’s annual electricity bill, and thus reduce carbon emissions by 90 tonnes – or around half of its annual carbon reduction target.

The €386,800 installation costs were 60 per cent funded by the EU’s CIP ICT-PSP Programme.

Belfast City Council has agreed that the City Hall will be ‘colour-washed’ on a number of special dates throughout the year. These are St. Patrick’s Day, July 12th (Orangefest), Valentine’s Day, the Chinese New Year, Polish Independence Day and Gay Pride day.

More information: www.illuminateproject.eu

SUSTAINABLE ENERGY FINANCE & INVESTMENT SUMMIT

The CROENERGY Sustainable Energy Finance and Investment Summit Conference will take place on 2-4 October 2013 in Croatia. The conference aims to identify ways of financing energy projects, especially energy efficiency and renewable energy as well as to bring closer issues related to the Croatian accession to the European Union - the use of Structural and Cohesion Fund opportunities.

The Conference will highlight the importance of investment and regional co-operation to promote energy efficiency. The conference is supported by ManagEnergy of the European Commission - leading European experts will voice their views in the area of ESCO financing and Energy Performance Contracting. ManagEnergy is a technical support initiative of the Intelligent Energy - Europe (IEE) which aims to assist actors from the public sector and their advisers working on energy efficiency and renewable energy.

Business clusters, as an important boost to regional economic development will open the programme of the second conference day – with European top of the crop sharing their stories. In occasion of the CROENERGY 2013, the next General Assembly of FEDARENE will be held in Tuželjske toplice (Croatia) on October 2, 2013.

More information: www.regea.org/croenergy2013/home.html

ENERGY EFFICIENCY WATCH 2 PROJECT

The project Energy-Efficiency-Watch 2 (EEW2), supported by the Intelligent Energy - Europe programme, closely follows the milestones in the political process concerning energy efficiency policy and especially those related to the Energy Services Directive and the National Energy Efficiency Action Plans (NEEAPs).

The final report comprises results from all analyses conducted during the Energy-Efficiency-Watch 2 project as well as from the survey with experts in all 27 EU Member States. This comprehensive report mirrors the implementation of energy efficiency policies across the EU.

Despite remarkable achievements, the overall picture for energy efficiency remains somewhat ambivalent in the NEEAP screening: An effective implementation of the measures induced by EU Directives will require a higher degree of harmonisation and integration. Up to now, measures addressing different sectors are often not well aligned to each other or lack a clear design when it comes to their implementation at the Member State level. Moreover, certain end-use areas are not addressed sufficiently (e.g. modal shift in transport, coherent policy packages for industry including carriage of goods, etc.).

The conclusion is that national energy efficiency policy packages have to be improved in all relevant sectors to achieve additional energy savings of at least 1% per year compared to autonomous energy efficiency improvements. Considering that the cost-effective potential is 2% per year, 1% seems even modest. A more ambitious implementation of EU Directives and energy efficiency policy could therefore bring net economic benefits to businesses and consumers in the Member States.

More information: www.energy-efficiency-watch.org

A lesson learnt from the project is that in order to reach more sensitive groups like handicapped people (this holds true also for other similar groups), one needs to establish good working cooperation with organizations that are trustworthy among members of the group in question. In this way, easier access and greater legitimacy of the action are guaranteed. More importantly, along with helping the households to reduce their energy consumption and bills, the visits have the even more important effect of providing access to professional support and making these households feel less socially isolated.

The Union of Handicapped People and “For Decent Life” have large membership and significant legitimacy among handicapped people. The two organizations help with the identification of households and the initial contact with them. In addition, employees of the organizations often accompany the ACHIEVE advisors to guarantee easier access into the households. In this way, the ACHIEVE service is recognized and trusted by handicapped people.

For Decent Life (Achiteq) and the Union of Handicapped People and “For Decent Life” (ACHIEVE) are two organizations that are sensitive towards handicapped people and open for cooperation with organizations that are trustworthy among sensitive groups like handicapped people (this holds true also for other similar groups), one needs to establish good working cooperation with organizations that are trustworthy among members of the group in question. In this way, easier access and greater legitimacy of the action are guaranteed. More importantly, along with helping the households to reduce their energy consumption and bills, the visits have the even more important effect of providing access to professional support and making these households feel less socially isolated.