

# EC-LINC

Energy Check for Low Income Households

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## A European Project Providing Information and Support to Households in Fuel Poverty

Households make up 25 % of the EU final energy demand. Rising energy prices are the subject of public debate in most European countries as well as challenges concerning climate change and the finiteness of global resources. For households on low incomes this issue is a matter of financial existence and a secure livelihood: in the worst case, it is a question of paying bills, switching on lights and staying warm in winter.

At the same time, information on energy efficiency in our own homes is complicated, and is usually not tailored to low income households. New technologies are not always self-explanatory and even buying a new energy efficient light bulb can be challenging. Low income households often do not have adequate information needed for choosing a new efficient household appliance or for learning to save energy at home by changing their behaviour.

Low income households usually cannot afford the initial investment for high-efficiency domestic appliances, so less efficient second-hand appliances are used. Language and social barriers make it difficult to inform this target group about energy efficiency issues.

The project “Energy-Check for Low Income Households” (EC-LINC) established tailored information and consultation approaches to assist low income households in saving energy and water at home. No- and low-cost measures have been combined within an advice service that is especially designed to bring practical knowledge on energy efficiency and viable tips to households who may be in fuel poverty. During the home visits, advice is provided on the efficient use of energy and water. Low cost devices such as compact fluorescent lamps (CFLs), switchable plug connectors and tap aerators have also been provided for free. Data collected in the households on consumption and installed measures was processed electronically. By this means, each household received an individual household report with a description of their potential savings and further tips for changing behaviour.

The EC-LINC pilot projects in Berlin, Flanders, Budapest, Vienna, Lower Austria and Carinthia provided motivation and knowledge to people on low incomes to live more energy efficiently. In some of the projects long-term unemployed people were trained to become energy advisors, so the consultation could be carried out peer-to-peer and the advisors themselves could improve their employment prospects.

## **Strong Networks for Higher Efficiency in Austria**

The Austrian pilot project “Energie-Check” for low income households was financed by the Regional Governments of Lower Austria and Carinthia. As the pilot project focused also on immigrants, a wide range of local partners were involved: municipalities engaged in the field of energy efficiency or fuel poverty, regional social institutions like social supermarkets, employment and housing associations, religious or cultural communities and helpdesks for immigrants.

### **Practical Saving Tools for Domestic Appliances**

The consultations were carried out by professional energy advisors who had experience in dealing with the target group of low income households. The selected advisors attended a half-day training course. The content of the training was region specific taking into account the different local actors and helpdesks for low income households. The training also included necessary administrative tasks and an introduction on how to install the provided energy saving tools.

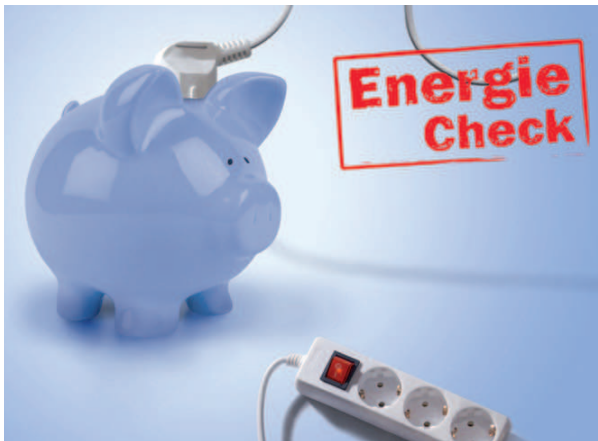
Some of the energy saving tools were especially useful because they showed the client an immediate comfort improvement. For example, electric kettles reduced cooking time and energy saving light bulbs improved the light intensity.

The most successful promotion strategy in order to reach vulnerable households, was to promote the service together with heating subsidies, granted by municipalities or the Regional Government.

### **Reaching a Special Target Group**

Addressing low income households has to be done carefully, as they often worry about being surveyed if they apply for the consulting service. In the case of immigrants the language barrier can enhance this feeling. A first step to tackle this problem is to translate press releases and provide promotion material in different languages.





The Austrian „Energie-Checks“ were carried out by professional energy consultants.

**energie:bewusst**  
Die unabhängige  
Energieberatung

**KÄRNTEN**



## Results in Austria

- ▶ **Number of consultations (households consulted):** 291
- ▶ **Number of consultants:** 16
- ▶ **Savings per household/year:** 955 kWh, 110 €
- ▶ **Savings CO<sub>2</sub> per household/year:** 276 kg

## Energy Saving Checks and Social Roof Insulation in Flanders

**KOMOSIE** choose to subcontract 14 local ‘Energy Savers’ companies to carry out the energy checks. Energy Savers are former lower educated and previously long-term unemployed people, now employed in a social economy organisation – the “Energy Savers” company. The Energy Savers (better known as “de Energiesnoeiers” in Dutch) were trained and supported to perform the energy check and install a package of 15 possible energy saving devices. These organisations all have local networks with several local social partner organisations, such as the social department of the municipality or a social housing company. Working together with them is the most effective way of reaching the most vulnerable households.

A media campaign by the Flemish government also supported the pilot project in Flanders to reach the specific target group of low income tenants (and their landlords) which were targeted in the country specific add-on of this pilot project (roof insulation).

**KOMOSIE** added an additional aspect (‘add-on’) to their pilot project; an extra grant for roof insulation for tenants including social assistance, generally necessary to reach agreement between the tenants and the landlord. The target group of low income tenants is very vulnerable and mostly dependant on the goodwill of the owner to support larger energy saving measures. The energy check was the starting point for this extra assistance.

### Lessons Learnt in Flanders

The vast majority of the advisors found the consultation of low income households more challenging compared to other target groups (e.g. their social situation, language barriers, etc.). An important lesson learnt was the importance of having access to information about a household’s energy use or energy bills, in order to be able to give tailored advice. Another important lesson was that advisors should receive specific training and acquire skills necessary for the role. For example, clear and easy-to-understand communication skills, and how to handle people in poverty or less motivated clients.





Energy saving checks in Flanders include guidance in the use of meter cards, pipe insulations and assistance to roof insulation.



### Results in Flanders

- ▶ **Number of consultations (households consulted):** 205
- ▶ **Number of consultants:** 14
- ▶ **Savings per household/year:** 2,427 kWh (453 kWh for electricity + 1,974 kWh for heating), 228 € (100 € for electricity + 128 € for heating)
- ▶ **Savings CO<sub>2</sub> per household/year:** 925 kg

## Energy Saving Checks in “Märkisches Viertel”

In Berlin, [Berlin Energy Agency \(BEA\)](#) and [Caritasverband für das Erzbistum Berlin](#) worked with the cooperative building company GESOBAU that is modernising 13,000 homes by 2015.

In the course of the pilot project, Berlin energy advisors consulted low income households and focused on modernised housing in “Märkisches Viertel” in the north of Berlin.

The energy advisor team consisted of six former long-term unemployed people. They were trained by a professional energy advisor and received social and technical mentoring by [Caritas Berlin](#) and [BEA](#).

### Learning to Live in a Modernised Home

The emphasis of the consultations has been heating and ventilation to help households become familiar to the new technology in their homes. During the modernisation thermostatic values were installed in homes to regulate room temperature but were challenging for households to use. Therefore, advice on the most comfortable temperature and how to adjust the valves correctly was very useful for households. According to experience from other projects with similar approaches, savings in heating energy through changes in consumer behaviour make up about 1 % of the consumption. As the buildings have also been insulated during modernisation and new windows installed, the tenants need to air their apartments regularly to prevent high humidity, condensation and mould. The energy advisors provided helpful advice to enable households to sufficiently ventilate their homes.

Aside from the individual household report, the households received a manual on energy efficient living in their modernised home, a temperature and humidity “check-card”, and electricity saving devices.





Consultation in Berlin reaches from explaining the energy bill to practical tips for consumer behaviour.

## Results in Germany

- ▶ **Number of consultations (households consulted):** 247
- ▶ **Number of consultants:** 6
- ▶ **Savings per household/year:** 290 kWh, 70 € (only electricity)
- ▶ **Savings CO<sub>2</sub> per household/year:** 173 kg

## 'Reduce Your Bills' in Hungary

In Hungary the pilot project used the name “Csekkcsökkentő” meaning “reduce your bills”. This helped to communicate the project effectively to the local communication and increase its popularity.

With the cooperation of four organisations from the social and environmental sector, 265 low income households were visited in Hungary. The local network was built up with the leadership of **Energiaklub**. In addition, Red Cross Hungary, Habitat for Humanity Hungary and the Social Department of Municipality Óbuda took part in the pilot project as partners in carrying out home energy visits. The advisors mostly consisted of social workers and engineers with experience in the social sector. Before the home visits, the advisors participated in a five day interactive training session organised by **Energiaklub**.

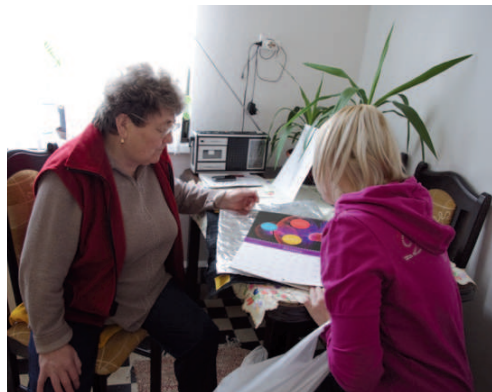
### Spreading Information by Multiple Actors

Thanks to the active local networks of the energy advisors, the project reached the target group very efficiently. High levels of interest and satisfaction of the clients, plus interest of the media, shows the usefulness and necessity of the service in Hungary. Beyond the package of energy saving devices, which was the most popular element of the project, energy advisors gave a lot of support to the households with no-cost energy tips.

The greatest strength of the project was the cooperation between actors from different sectors. Another success was the multiplication factor of the service: it initiated discussions about energy efficiency in families and neighbourhoods of the visited households, and therefore is likely to have had a greater impact than that measured.

The goal for the future is to integrate the experiences of the pilot project into local social policies.





Advisors visited 265 low income households in Hungary.

## Results in Hungary

- ▶ **Number of consultations (households consulted):** 265
- ▶ **Number of consultants:** 7
- ▶ **Savings per household/year:** 755 kWh, 35 €
- ▶ **Savings CO<sub>2</sub> per household/year:** 194 kg

## Tackling Fuel Poverty in the UK

**Changeworks** delivers energy advice to households by working with a range of partners, including Home Energy Scotland (funded by the Scottish Government), The City of Edinburgh Council, Citizens Advice Bureaux and housing associations. Many projects access charitable funds such as the national lottery and are focused on innovative forms of delivery.

The consultations are provided by ten experienced energy advisors who hold professional qualifications and benefit from a programme of in-house training. Working across seventeen projects these advisors are supported by our 'heat heroes' volunteers who provide lighter touch advice at a community level.

The service involves referrals from third parties such as local authorities, housing associations and Citizens Advice Bureaux. Usually the client will need specialist support with managing energy debts and may face disconnection. Part of the consultation focuses around energy saving behaviours but the priority is often negotiating bill reductions and payment schedules with the supply company. Where applicable, the client will be referred to a government scheme for measures such as loft insulation, cavity wall insulation or an upgraded heating system. By the end of the process the debt issue should be manageable and the client will better understand their household energy needs and relevant energy saving behaviours.

### **Most important results and experience**

Defining fuel poverty and setting targets for reduction has been important to UK programmes.

In the UK, advice is often focused on fuel debt and working with energy suppliers rather than simply promoting energy efficient behaviours.

Consultations and advice are evolving to include wider sustainability issues related to cooking and food waste which helps to achieve wider social benefits for low income households.

Compared to other countries, advice projects in the UK are more diverse and innovative, but this is a product of a less stable funding support making it difficult to maintain longer-term programmes.





Changeworks advisors providing advice to houses at risk of fuel poverty, including how to access government grant schemes. Rising fuel bills and debt management are a significant issue for households in the UK.

## Results in UK

- ▶ **Number of consultations (households consulted):** 1,412
- ▶ **Number of consultants:** 10
- ▶ **Savings per household/year:** 1,513 kWh, 114 €
- ▶ **Savings CO<sub>2</sub> per household/year:** 329 kg

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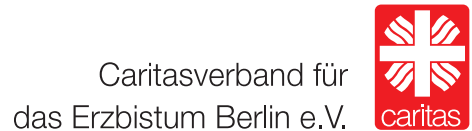


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