

ANTWERP
BELGIUM



ANTWERP IS RUNNING AN ADVICE AND DEMONSTRATION CENTRE FOR RESIDENTS TO IMPROVE ENERGY EFFICIENCY OF HOMES. IT IS WORKING WITH A SOCIAL ECONOMY ASSOCIATION TO COMBAT ENERGY POVERTY AND PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR DISADVANTAGED GROUPS TO GAIN SKILLS AND WORK EXPERIENCE IN THE GREEN ECONOMY.



JANA DEFORCHE

jana.deforche@stad.antwerpen.be

www.antwerpen.be/eCache/ABE/34/873.html
www.levanto.be

KEYWORDS

energy efficiency, social economy, EcoHouse, Levanto, collaboration, zero interest loans

FIGHTING POVERTY AND UNEMPLOYMENT WHILE REACHING CITY CLIMATE TARGETS

CONTEXT

In Antwerp 17.5% of the city's population is unemployed or economically inactive with low skills and poor prospects of finding a job.

Energy costs are increasingly becoming a burden for many households in Antwerp. Outdated appliances or delayed renovation mean that poorer households are often in a worse condition. Reducing energy consumption and improving the energy performance of buildings can benefit household finances and the environment. The city needs to work with all residents on its goal of becoming climate neutral by 2050, and vulnerable groups may require special assistance if they lack sufficient financial resources to invest in energy efficiency measures in their homes.

SOLUTION

EcoHouse is an advice and demonstration centre for sustainable building and living run by the city of Antwerp. It is open to the general public, with a substantive part of its work focused on more vulnerable groups. EcoHouse in partnership with Levanto, a social economy association, conducts energy audits using trained staff on work experience placement, and offers both short and long term solutions for saving energy and money.

The short term solutions include:

- advice on how to change behaviour to save energy, and
- free installation of simple energy saving products such as energy saving light bulbs.

For more advanced solutions EcoHouse prepares a personalised plan for investing in energy saving infrastructure, which is based on the energy audit. For example, installing roof insulation or new energy efficient heating devices. It then provides support to residents in implementing these solutions.



Low income households that would not qualify for a loan at a commercial bank can also receive a special zero interest loan. EcoHouse can help them find and negotiate with contractors and coordinate the works. These services are offered to people on low income, and social assistance recipients; be they home owners or tenants.

The work experience placements organised by Levanto, in partnership with Antwerp's grid operators, are reserved for people who have been unemployed for at least one year and either did not attend or did not finish high school. They receive an individual training programme for the first six months to strengthen their chances on the open labour market. The programme comprises of two equal parts; on-the-job training with a personal trainer, and a customised education component based on the individual's aspirations, interests, qualifications and preferences, which also includes obligatory classes. On passing the required technical tests they are able to carry out energy audits without the trainer.

After working for Levanto for one year, the employees are assisted in finding another job that fits their qualifications and interests.

IMPACT

In 2014 20,737 audits were carried out. The estimated average saving potential per audit is 78 kWh of electricity, 130 kWh of gas, 2034 litres of water and 85 kg of CO₂ emissions per year. Changes in behaviour alone can save between 10-20% on energy consumption.

Levanto helps 1,970 people annually to strengthen their employability. After the programme people are able to enter a range of technical jobs in the building and energy industry. Others find jobs as energy auditors or advisors.

These measures contribute to reducing energy poverty; improving quality of life and helping the city meet its climate change targets.



CHALLENGES

In the beginning it was difficult to reach the target group of low income households with the programme of energy saving measures. People living in poverty often struggle so much with daily challenges in life that they are not easily convinced to look into investment with long term returns. It was also found that traditional means of communication such as newsletters, especially ones using terms like 'energy audit' and 'infrastructural energy savings investments', had little impact and a discouraging effect.

Offering easy to implement solutions that bring immediate gains helped attract interest. The city created a simple and attractive voucher with information on free energy saving products, together with tips on how to change behaviour and save money straight away. Creating a more user-friendly application system for the audit also encouraged more people to apply.

Reaching out to people through organisations significantly boosted the response rate to the programme. Today EcoHouse works in partnership with a range of welfare, housing, education, migrant, and community organisations, and across city departments. This intense collaboration is considered one of the project's key success factors.

FUNDING

The project receives financial support from the Flemish regional government's department of social economy under the 'energy savers' programme for employing vulnerable people in energy saving social enterprises. Antwerp's grid operators, Eandis and Infracore also provide financial support to the project, since Flemish law obliges these companies to help people, mainly vulnerable groups save energy by providing services and grants. The Belgian federal government funds the zero interest loans through the Fund for Energy Saving. The city of Antwerp coordinates the project and administers the loans. It also provides publicity and other services in the EcoHouse.

The project also receives support from a federal programme for labour market reintegration, which offers grants and lowers labour tax on contracts offered to vulnerable people.

