



**Community Energy for Energy
Solidarity:
Evaluation of the CEES pilot projects**

Executive summary

**Kevin Burchell and Rosie Day
University of Birmingham, UK**

August 2024

www.energysolidarity.eu

Introduction

The CEES project and the CEES evaluation

In the Community Energy for Energy Solidarity (CEES)¹ project, six energy communities implemented six pilot projects to alleviate energy poverty, including projects to diversify sources of funding for this work. Knowledge exchange and mutual support between the energy communities was a key component of the six pilots. Within CEES, such projects are referred to as a form of energy solidarity. Led by the University of Birmingham, the CEES team implemented a comprehensive evaluation of the six pilot projects.

Evaluation materials

The following evaluation materials are available at www.energysolidarity.eu/evaluation:

- A short summary of the evaluation findings
- The Full evaluation report (232pp)
- The Executive summary (15pp)
- Individual documents of each of the evaluations of the six CEES pilot projects, plus an additional project that was evaluated through CEES.
- The full Evaluation framework (60pp)

About this document

This document contains the Executive summary. In the Full evaluation report, this is Chapter 1 and begins on p3.

Key terms in this document

Energy poverty

The situation in which households are unable to access affordable energy services (such as adequate warmth, cooling, lighting, and energy to power appliances), which underpin elements of human flourishing (such as health and wellbeing, relationships, social inclusion, employment, recreation and education). (Day et al.,2016)².

¹ The CEES project received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 101026972. The project commenced in June 2021 and ran to the end of August 2024.

² Day, R. et al (2016) Conceptualising energy use and energy poverty using a capabilities framework, Energy Policy, 93: 255–264.



Energy communities

Local collectives of individuals that tend to share values and ambitions relating to: supporting equitable, democratic and fair transitions towards more local, sustainable and efficient energy systems; establishing renewable and decentralised energy systems; assisting local community members with energy efficiency, demand reduction and energy poverty; or economic activity on energy for social and community benefit. These organisations are diverse in structure, size and scope.

Energy solidarity

Actors willingly working in ways that align, on a shared goal of overcoming energy-related adversity that is experienced by one or more of the parties. Energy solidarity is inspired by empathy and / or a sense of justice, and may, but does not have to, involve reciprocal obligation. Stronger solidarity involves a more sustained commitment, and / or a willingness to incur a higher personal cost in pursuit of the shared goal. (Day and Burchell, 2023)³

Fund mechanism

Fund mechanisms are employed to raise funds or income to fund work on energy poverty alleviation.

Identify mechanism

Identify mechanisms aim to seek out and identify households in energy poverty, recruit them to projects and assess their eligibility for projects.

Alleviate ('soft' and 'hard') mechanism

Alleviate mechanisms aim to alleviate energy poverty. 'Soft' alleviation mechanisms do this through household engagement, provision of advice about energy poverty, energy efficiency measures, the provision of energy kits consisting of a variety of small energy efficiency measures (such as window insulation material) and support applying for financial support. 'Hard' alleviation mechanisms alleviate energy poverty through building renovation, retrofitting and refurbishment. In CEES, hard alleviation was undertaken in one pilot project. Several of the CEES pilot projects include recruitment and training for energy advisers. These activities have been included as part of the Alleviate mechanisms.

³ Day, R. and K. Burchell (2023) Energy solidarity in Energy Communities: alleviating energy poverty and supporting just energy transitions through solidarity approaches. European Sociological Association RN12 mid-term and Energy and Society Network 6th international joint conference, 'Energy, Environment and Societies in Crises', 6-8 September 2023, Trento, Italy.



Executive summary

1. Summary of key findings

In the Community Energy for Energy Solidarity (CEES)⁴ project, six energy communities implemented six pilot projects to alleviate energy poverty, including projects to diversify sources of funding for this work. Knowledge exchange and mutual support between the energy communities was a key component of the six pilots. Within CEES, such projects are referred to as a form of energy solidarity. Led by The University of Birmingham, the CEES team implemented a comprehensive evaluation of the six pilot projects.

The CEES pilot project evaluation indicates that, when they have adequate resources, energy communities are able to implement energy solidarity projects that are highly valued by participating households and can produce positive change in households' energy know-how. Many households felt more able to afford their energy bills after being involved in one of the pilots. Due to external factors, such as changing seasons, it is not possible to wholly attribute this change to the pilot projects – nevertheless, this is a positive sign. Key factors in this success were: an approach to households that emphasises empathy, care and patience; ability to build trust; ongoing knowledge exchange between energy communities; and partnerships with other local organisations, such as the providers of health and social care services.

In addition, when they have adequate resources, energy communities are able to develop more entrepreneurial strategies for funding and income generation. For example, in CEES, the energy communities successfully secured funding from service contracts (from both public and private sector organisations), grants, and public and corporate donations. While grants and service contracts can support the staff time costs of energy solidarity work, this is less likely to be the case through donations, where the funding of materials for small measures is a more realistic ambition. Funders should note that grant funding is likely to remain an important component of energy communities' income strategies for energy solidarity work.

At the same time, work on energy solidarity is new for most energy communities and different from their more well-established activities. This means that energy communities will typically need to do significant preparation before starting to work on energy poverty alleviation. For instance, energy communities need to employ and train energy advisors who have the necessary values, 'soft skills',

⁴ The CEES project received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 101026972. The project commenced in June 2021 and ran to the end of August 2024.



social instincts and technical skills for this work. In addition, it takes considerable time to develop and implement energy solidarity projects and energy solidarity teams need to be able to operate flexibly as they encounter inevitable challenges. Most of the pilot projects in CEES experienced challenges with respect to levels of householder trust, sometimes related to previous bad experiences with energy companies. As energy advisors who visit households will sometimes encounter people in very difficult circumstances, the work can be draining and energy advisors themselves will need support, as well as policies to ensure their health and safety when undertaking visits. The protection of householders is also important, through adherence to data protection legislation and systems for 'safeguarding' when householders are felt to be at risk of harm. The novelty of this work also suggests that energy communities are likely to encounter time-consuming challenges along the way.

It is important to recognise that the causes of energy poverty in Europe are structural. This means that they are rooted in the structures of labour markets, welfare systems, building fabrics and energy markets. For this reason, although many energy communities stand ready and able to work on energy poverty, responsibility remains with European governments to implement policies to address these more fundamental issues. Nonetheless, the CEES project has shown that energy solidarity approaches by energy communities offer considerable potential for energy poverty alleviation, in particular when energy communities are able to work with other local organisations.

2. Introduction

The CEES project

The central objective of the CEES project was to examine the proposition that energy communities can alleviate energy poverty in their local areas. This work is known within CEES as energy solidarity. CEES achieved this by bringing together six energy communities that have previous experience of working on energy poverty, facilitating inspiration and knowledge sharing between the energy communities (and other CEES partners), and implementing six pilot projects that included novel activities for each energy community. The six pilot projects were [comprehensively evaluated](#) and a [CEES Energy Solidarity Toolkit](#) was produced to support other energy communities in energy solidarity work. There is more information about CEES in Chapter 2 of this evaluation report.

The CEES pilot evaluation

The CEES pilot evaluation was based on an Evaluation Framework, which featured aims, principles, objectives, and definitions and indicators of key concepts relating to the processes and impacts of the six energy solidarity pilot projects. The evaluation employed a mixed-methods design, including the following elements: formal interviews with project managers and, in some case, with delivery teams; surveys with households, energy adviser trainees, energy advisers and local partners/stakeholders; informal interactions with project managers; and information gathering from internal project

documents. There is more information about the CEES Evaluation Framework in Chapter 3 of this evaluation report and in the full [Evaluation Framework](#) document on the CEES website.



3. Key findings and learnings

Preparing for energy solidarity work

The evaluation of the CEES pilot projects highlights several aspects of how energy communities need to prepare to undertake energy solidarity work.

1. **Energy solidarity work is distinctive:** The CEES pilot projects show the extent to which work on energy poverty is different to the regular work of energy communities. In particular, work on energy poverty will inevitably take them into new and unfamiliar spaces and into supporting people who have challenging life experiences and situations. Indeed, in CEES, energy advisors sometimes encountered severe deprivation and desperation. Previous research emphasises that many people in energy poverty will have had negative previous experiences when they engage with organisations (both private and public), meaning that obtaining householders' trust can be challenging.
2. **Comprehensive planning and long term commitment:** Realistic project planning, action plans and evaluation plans are of critical value. Experiences in CEES suggest that energy solidarity projects will likely take longer and be more challenging to set up than expected. This has implications for budgets and funding.



3. **Need for strong social instincts and skills:** The people who manage and deliver energy solidarity projects should have strong social instincts and social skills, such as empathy, understanding, listening and non-judgement, as well as technical energy know-how. One of the CEES partners used the term ‘a sort of social worker’ to encapsulate these skills. This means that it can be problematic to reassign existing staff to energy solidarity projects and that it will often be better to recruit staff with these skills specifically for this work.
4. **Training:** Comprehensive training for new energy advisers is essential. CEES partners suggested that it is more straightforward to train people in energy know-how than it is to train them in the essential social skills that are discussed above.



The Enercoop Solidarity Taskforce training day.

5. **Energy advisor well-being:** The work of energy advisers in energy solidarity projects can be rewarding. However, due to the challenging life situations of many clients, it can also be emotionally and psychologically demanding. Therefore, it is important to set up and implement workplace practices to support the well-being and resilience of staff who are doing this work. This might include keeping in regular contact with energy advisers, regular discussion of these issues in team meetings and providing access to sessions that are facilitated by well-being and resilience professionals.
6. **Flexibility:** Energy communities are likely to need to adapt plans as the work unfolds. Thus, it is preferable to have a dedicated and independent team working on energy solidarity projects, that can be agile and adaptive when needed. Over-reliance on other internal departments, or complicated internal approval structures, can reduce the ability of energy solidarity teams to work effectively.
7. **Volunteers:** Three of the CEES partners worked with volunteers to deliver aspects of their pilots. All three found that, although some progress was possible, working with volunteers was more challenging than had been hoped.
8. **Data and monitoring:** A GDPR-compliant system for storing household data and monitoring the progress of households through projects is essential. While it is possible to do this in a

spreadsheet, such as Excel, experiences in the CEES project suggest that it is worth investing in a dedicated Client Management System (CMS). CMS systems need to be set up with the requirements for future monitoring and reporting in mind.

9. **Risk management:** When energy advisers are working out of their office/home and especially when they are visiting clients' homes, it is essential to develop and implement a policy and protocol to assess risk and manage the health and safety of the energy advisers.
10. **'Safeguarding' for vulnerable people:** Similarly, it is important to develop and implement a policy and protocol for what an energy adviser should do if they feel that a vulnerable person that they have met in the course of their work (e.g. a child) is at risk of serious harm.

Funding energy solidarity work

Securing funding for energy poverty work is clearly a key requirement. Although most of the CEES partners had previously been successful in securing grant funding to support work on energy poverty, they agreed that it is important to develop a portfolio of funding sources. In particular, partners noted the value of securing funding that is not 'ring-fenced' for a particular project, and thus allows them to cover ongoing core costs, such as administrative support, and to fund the salaries of project managers and delivery teams between grant-funded projects. The following key points emerged:

1. **Entrepreneurial approaches:** Although fundraising can be a time-consuming and slow-burning activity, when they have the resources, energy communities are able to successfully develop and implement more entrepreneurial and creative approaches to funding energy solidarity actions. Of the approaches described below, it is grant funding and service contracts that have the most potential to cover the time costs of energy solidarity work.
2. **Microdonations:** One of the CEES partners, which is an energy supplier, already operates a successful microdonations scheme in which its energy customers have the option to add microdonations to support work on energy poverty to their bills. Three other CEES partners, that do not have energy customers, tried to set up such schemes in other contexts. However, for a range of reasons, none of them were successful. A conclusion of the CEES project is that, while microdonations schemes have potential when energy communities have their own customers, this is much less likely to be the case where energy communities do not have energy customers.
3. **Service contracts:** Two of the CEES partners were successful in securing sizeable service contracts for energy solidarity actions during the project, one with a public sector housing provider and the other with a private sector gas network operator. While both partners reported that it was time-consuming to develop these relationships, such service contracts clearly have significant potential for funding work on energy poverty.
4. **Public donations (crowdfunding):** Two of the CEES partners implemented successful campaigns to secure public donations. These public campaigns required developing campaign branding and

messages, setting up donation webpages and using a QR code in communications, largely via social media and posts in various relevant local newsletters. The sums that were raised through public donations were more limited than might typically be secured through grants or service contracts. Nonetheless, partners were able to use this income to fund important aspects of energy poverty work, such as small measures energy kits to give to households.



The ZEZ 'Ease their Troubles' public donation fundraising promotional video. [Link to video.](#)



ALIenergy public fundraising banner.

- 5. Corporate donations:** Two partners successfully implemented campaigns to secure corporate donations. The most successful aspects of these campaigns were those that selected and targeted companies with corporate social responsibility (CSR) funds, and companies with links with energy (for instance, renewables installers) or with buildings (such as architectural practices). The sums raised were more limited than through grants and service contracts.

Knowledge sharing

Knowledge sharing between the CEES partners was central to the project. The CEES project featured a range of activities to support knowledge sharing, including bilateral meetings between partners, monthly pilot progress meetings, face-to-face consortium meetings every four months, meetings with the evaluation team, ongoing sharing of plans and progress in documents and sharing of other documents (see full details in Chapter 4).

The evaluation shows that all of these approaches to knowledge sharing were highly valued by all of the CEES pilot partners. Notwithstanding the publication of the CEES Energy Solidarity Toolkit, it is important that key funders continue to support knowledge sharing among energy communities with respect to energy solidarity actions.

Identifying households in energy poverty

The CEES evaluation highlights a number of findings with respect to recruiting households into the pilot projects and assessing whether they were eligible for the projects.

Recruitment

In CEES, the pilots employed a number of different approaches to bringing householders to their projects. These can be divided into indirect approaches and direct approaches:

Indirect approaches involved working with external partners (and sometimes internal colleagues). These included: taking referrals from sector housing, healthcare and social care providers; taking referrals from other local organisations who are likely to already be in contact with households in energy poverty; working with municipalities to set up workshops within already-existing programmes of events for older people; and/or taking referrals from a broader internal energy efficiency advice service.

Direct approaches included: placing posters and leaflets around the neighbourhood in places where people in energy poverty were likely to see them (e.g. pharmacies, public health centres, libraries etc.); attending events that were set-up by other related organisations; setting up their own events; and placing notices in relevant newsletters. One partner even recruited participants by securing an appearance on a local TV breakfast show and two radio shows.

In two of the pilot projects, these processes particularly focused on older people, on the basis that older people are often more vulnerable to energy poverty than the general population. One of these pilots had additional eligibility criteria, while the other did not. Key findings on recruitment include:

1. **Context is key:** All of these approaches were successful to some extent. That said, since they were carried out in specific contexts, it is not possible to identify ways of doing this that are universally correct or incorrect. Experiences in the CEES project suggest that the ideal way to conduct this task will depend on the specifics of the local project and context. Nonetheless, the evaluation enables us to highlight several general points.
2. **Getting the balance right:** In CEES, the partners experienced concern about whether their approach to this would bring either *too many* or *too few* households to the project. For instance,



while appearing on local TV was a significant achievement for one project, this led to an immediate flood of enquiries which was very challenging to deal with. With this in mind, it is important to set up systems for a waiting list and for accurately advising households about what happens next and when.

3. **Partnerships and referrals:** The CEES pilot projects show how important partnerships and referrals are in this context. That said, across the pilot projects, setting up the partnerships and implementing referral systems took longer than expected. This was the case for both approaches that were conducted internally (e.g. taking referrals from internal advisers of broader energy efficiency advice) and approaches that required external partnerships. In both internal and external contexts, referrals were slow to come through initially, ineligible referrals were common and repeated briefings were required to improve things.

Assessing eligibility

Some of the pilot partners implemented processes for assessing eligibility. Criteria for eligibility included being in receipt of particular benefits, or income/pension below a certain threshold or age. In some cases, the project would not be able to tackle the problem that needed addressing (e.g. repairs to homes were not possible in most of the projects). Key findings include:

1. **Eligibility criteria:** It is important to design eligibility criteria that distinguish between households that are in need and households that are not, but that are also straightforward to implement, and not too difficult or off-putting for householders.
2. **Identifying households in need:** In some of the pilots, there was evidence that some of the participating households might not have been experiencing difficulties paying their energy bills (given that this was self-reported, it is also possible that participants were not willing to confirm that they were struggling). This was particularly the case in a pilot project that focused on older people but did not have any eligibility criteria. This reinforces the significance of how eligibility criteria are operated.

Alleviating energy poverty

The six CEES partners engaged with householders in telephone calls, home visits, workshops and 'drop in' events. In addition, four shared and supported self-renovation (3SR) projects, in which householders are supported by professional craftspeople and volunteers for their self-renovation projects, were implemented. Key findings include:

1. **Highly valued engagements:** Across all six of the CEES pilot projects, where evaluation was possible, these engagements were highly valued by participants. For instance, participants largely agreed that the engagement events were well run and suitable for them; participants also felt that the people who delivered the engagement events were respectful to them.



Further, in most cases, participants agreed that they had learned useful information about using less energy and reducing their energy bills.



A Les 7 Vents 3SR renovation worksite.

- 2. Reasons for success:** These successes were the result of the knowledge exchange, learning, good planning, flexibility/agility and training that were emphasised in CEES. In addition, some of the qualitative comments from participating households show that the approach of the delivery teams emphasised empathy, respect, taking time and care. These values are clearly very important to successful energy solidarity work.

- 3. Impact and change:** Regarding impacts on energy poverty itself, it is important to note that changes over time cannot always be directly attributed to the pilot interventions alone. This is because factors such as seasonality and fluctuating energy prices, which might also have an impact on household energy use, cannot be controlled for within the context of the CEES evaluation. Relatively small sample sizes will have limited the potential for the tests to show statistically significant changes. Nonetheless, the evaluation data does show positive change among households in the medium to long term (between three and six months) following the interventions. For instance, in some cases, the ability to afford energy bills increased, while in others households' self-restriction of access to energy services (such as heating and cooking) decreased. In some cases, the negative impacts of energy poverty were reduced, for instance with respect to physical health or mental health.



Fitting a draught excluder at a Green Energy Cooperative (ZEZ) home visit.



A Coopérnico workshop for older people.

- 4. Limits to impacts:** Although these are positive findings, it is important to note what some CEES partners referred to as the ‘sticking plaster’ situation. Partners used this term to refer to the potentially limited and temporary impacts that some interventions, such as the provision of a ‘crisis grant’, can have within the context of great, growing and ongoing need.



Repowering London, Beat the Cold roadshow event, 08-02-24, Moorlands Pantry.

- 4. The ongoing responsibilities of governments:** The implication of this observation is that although energy communities certainly can and will help to alleviate energy poverty, broader action is also required. The causes of energy poverty in Europe are structural; that is, rooted in the structures of building fabrics, energy markets, labour markets and welfare systems. Therefore, the solutions to energy poverty are also likely to be structural. Hence, it is important for EU and UK policy-makers to understand that, although many energy communities stand ready and able to work on energy poverty, responsibility remains with European governments to address these more fundamental issues.