

**City of Vilvoorde (Belgium) is looking for international partners to implement a project answering call LIFE-2022-CET-ENERPOV – “Addressing building related interventions in vulnerable districts”.**

**No House Left Behind** (working title).

**Goal:** Scaling up proven strategies to renovate homes of vulnerable owners in urban neighbourhoods to 2050 energy standards.

**Project period:** 01/01/2024 – 31/12/2026 (TBC).

**Situation.** The city of Vilvoorde is located to the north of Brussels in the (former) industrial basin. It is strongly interwoven with the metropolitan area and is the fastest growing, youngest and most diverse city in Flanders. Vilvoorde has 46,500 inhabitants (compared to 34,982 in 2000). It had a strong presence of heavy industry (coke factories, chemistry, car assembly, metal, paint, etc.). Although the city is rapidly transforming into a modern residential city, the legacy of that industrial past is still very tangible. Outdated working-class houses are dominant in most neighbourhoods. This leads to a high presence of deprivation, with an average income that is 20% lower than the Flemish average. The metropolitan context also leads to high ethnic diversity: 57% of Vilvoordeans are of foreign origin.

**Issue.** For a section of residents, scarcity of affordable rental housing leads to the need to purchase outdated working-class houses, without having the necessary renovation funds. This has negative consequences on the finances, health and well-being of these families. Flemish figures indicate that at least 3% of owners are so-called ‘emergency buyers’. Translated to the Vilvoorde scale, this means at least 514 families, often clustered in specific neighbourhoods. An analysis by the Flemish government shows that Vilvoorde has 11 vulnerable neighbourhoods, out of a total of 30. Only six Flemish cities (including Antwerp and Ghent) score worse. This leads to headaches for the city council, as these families are slipping further and further into energy poverty as a result of rising energy prices and more ambitious climate targets. At the same time, this target group is difficult to reach. There is a language problem, there is distrust of the government and there are also social and administrative barriers. These are problems that are a reality in many urban environments across Europe. Developing an approach to these difficult and persistent problems is important, since a disproportionate amount of energy can be saved in these houses. There is also a risk of a gap opening up here among residents and between residents and government, with climate and energy as the cause. This could undermine support for the necessary energy transition.

**Experiences.** Faced with these needs, the city of Vilvoorde already took action. Experiments were made with collective renovation support in vulnerable neighbourhoods, the city participated in a regional initiative to implement new forms of financing for emergency buyers, and investments were made in subsidies for private owners. In this way, the city gained a lot of experience with (the collective approach to) energy poverty in the most vulnerable neighbourhoods. The results are striking: in one disadvantaged neighbourhood, around 40 homes were renovated, out of a total of 220 homes there. Other ongoing projects in specific vulnerable neighbourhoods are also yielding encouraging results.

**Offer.** The city of Vilvoorde has developed an approach that leads to proven results. This approach has outgrown the phase of research and experimentation, but today it remains locked in by the limited scale of the city and the narrow project structure. There is now an opportunity to further refine, scale up and apply this approach in other similar neighbourhoods across Europe. If successful, this will create an approach that brings the 2050 goals within reach of even the most difficult target groups. This approach leads to a reduction in energy consumption, an increase in the wellbeing of the families concerned, a reduction in social inequality and greater support for the necessary energy transition among all sections of the population.

**Willingness to cooperate.** Our approach is not complete. Experience shows that renovations with emergency buyers rarely lead to investments in renewable energy. The entire available budget is first invested in housing quality and insulation. This is a pity, since investments in renewable energy can be financially interesting for those residents. Also, the roofs are often very suitable for installing solar panels. The question is then how to provide these owners with renewable energy in an affordable way. The city would like to investigate the principle of ESCO financing for individual owners, roll it out and make it part of the total renovation offer. This is also necessary if we want to make these homes 2050-proof. European partners can undoubtedly contribute relevant knowledge and experience here.

Another question that needs to be answered is how we can tackle multifamily housing more effectively. This group still remains too much out of the picture, but it comprises more than 30% of all buildings in the city. The complexity of co-ownership comes into play here, and here too there are undoubtedly partners who can contribute experience. In both of the above cases, the city of Vilvoorde can add its experience and thus arrive at a comprehensive approach, for all types of owners.

It is also noted that good results have been achieved, but that these results are insufficiently monitored. There is a need for more objective data on the energy consumption of these households, certainly after renovation. This will make it clear whether the renovations are achieving the intended goal and whether additional efforts are needed in the after-care phase with regard to energy behaviour. We would like to look, together with the European partners, at possible instruments to answer this question.

Finally, there are lessons to be learned in communicating the project and its results. In Vilvoorde, a start was made on a one-stop shop, but it is clear that experiences from other cities can be an added value to further refine the concept and make it more successful. *Savoir faire*, but also *faire savoir*, in the interest of the project, the owners and the intended objectives.

**Concrete ambitions Vilvoorde.** Taking into account the 2050 objectives and the 514 emergency buyers in the city, we want to deliver 20 energy renovations every year. That is also the objective for Vilvoorde within this project: to support 60 emergency buyers in the period 2024 - 2026. On the scale of Vilvoorde, that is ambitious. Ambitious, but feasible. And only if we implement the following sub-actions:

- Incorporate the experiences of the partners in a roadmap, which indicates in detail how we can proceed with the necessary renovations in the case of hard-to-reach owners. This work has to be of real added value for the partners, with concrete working methods, roles and responsibilities, possible tools, thresholds, solutions, ... . This roadmap is a living document and will be continuously adapted throughout the project, following the shared experiences of all partners.
- Further refining the one-stop-shop, beyond logos and names. The experiences of the emergency buyer are central to this, with the sole aim of reaching as many people as possible, convincing them and keeping them on board throughout the renovation process.
- Research and rollout of ESCO financing model for the installation of renewable energy to emergency buyers. This action offers a solution for the observation that the available renovation budget for emergency buyers is always insufficient to install solar panels. This action makes it possible to achieve the 2050 goals for these homes.  
- Develop practical, low-threshold ways to trace emergency buyers. In addition to the existing ways (door-to-door actions, interest-free bullet loans for renovation, thermographic scans, etc.), we would make maximum use of the creativity of all the partners involved. This sub-action is necessary in order to track down a sufficient number of emergency buyers and to spur them into action.
- Gaining insight into the domestic reality of energy poverty, and the impact of our project on it. This can be done through quantitative measurements, and also through qualitative questioning of the residents themselves. For this we can rely on specialised partners (for

Vilvoorde this is SAAMO). This action is necessary to fully understand the underlying problems and the structural adjustments to the project that are required.

- We are achieving good results, but monitoring them insufficiently. Scaling up must include better and systematic monitoring. We are looking for ways, for example, to use digital meters to automatically read the energy results before and after the renovation. This is necessary in order to understand whether the energy renovations also yield energy gains.

**European network.** Vilvoorde has been a partner in the Urbact network since 2019. Within the Urbact project "Zero Carbon Cities", we worked on the sense of urgency of climate policy via carbon budgets but mainly on cooperation with local stakeholders for the implementation of concrete projects. As a city, we must be able to further scale up from our strengths to fast and especially effective projects so that we can get everyone on board in this transition mindset. To this end, we need to look for synergies between different targets (renovation and renewable energy), we need to look for complementary and successful projects in other European cities and we need to realise this from within a challenging socio-economic reality. In this way, we want to work with international and local partners towards concrete achievements with measurable results. It is time for ACTION!

**Project structure.** The Life call asks for a minimum of 3 partners from 3 different European countries. For the partnership, we are looking for two other cities from other countries with similar renovation challenges and complementary approaches. Apart from three cities, we might include a European organisation as the communication and dissemination partner. Climate Alliance has already signalled willingness to do this. The City of Vilvoorde will be an enthusiastic and creative partner. However, it is not able to take the lead in a European project. We are therefore looking for one of the other partners to act as a lead partner.

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