European Commission

Support Service for Citizen-led renovation projects - Phase II

ENERGENT

1. Descriptive Analysis

1.1. Inspiring cases author and organisation

This report has been prepared by Orestis Kouloulas from Th!nk E, compiling information from the interview taken by Francesca Van Daele from Th!nk E with the ENERGENT representatives. ENERGENT was one of the Pilot projects of Citizen-led renovation Phase I.

1.2. Executive overview

ENERGENT is a cooperative initiative based in East Flanders, Belgium, that guides citizens through energy-efficient home renovations. Its mission is to combine climate action with citizen empowerment by offering tailored coaching, technical advice, and coordination with partner contractors. Operating mainly in Ghent and surrounding municipalities, ENERGENT leverages more than a decade of supportive local policy and strong municipal partnerships. Through a structured customer journey, citizens receive structured support across the full renovation journey, including post-renovation follow-up. With over 2,500 cooperative members, ENERGENT has already enabled significant CO_2 savings, created local jobs, and strengthened trust between citizens, contractors, and public authorities. Its model balances financial neutrality with environmental impact, ensuring that renovations remain affordable and citizen-driven.

1.3. Relevance and applicability vis-à-vis the CLR component

As one of the pilots in the first phase of the Citizen-led Renovation initiative, ENERGENT shows how a cooperative model can anchor renovation efforts in community ownership. Its governance structure, with decision-making power in the hands of the general assembly of cooperative members, ensures that citizens play a direct role in shaping activities. Another distinctive contribution to CLR is ENERGENT's use of personas, developed in Phase I, which enabled tailored communication strategies and avoided one-size-fits-all messaging. Partnerships with municipalities and Energy Houses proved vital, as citizens' trust in local authorities significantly amplified outreach and legitimacy. The structured customer journey, supported by a CRM system and the continued availability of energy advisors for follow-up questions, further strengthened trust and long-term engagement. Taken together, these elements illustrate how professional coaching, local embedding, and targeted communication can turn citizen interest into measurable CO_2 savings and tangible renovation outcomes, while keeping citizens firmly at the centre of the process.

1.4 Name of CLR initiative and geographical scope

The ENERGENT Citizen-led renovation Initiative operates primarily in East Flanders, Belgium, with a particular focus on Ghent and the surrounding areas. The region, home to around 1.5 million inhabitants, benefits from a political environment shaped by over twelve years of progressive policies and green party influence. This context, fostering social awareness of energy efficiency measures, has played a significant role in supporting ENERGENT's activities and impact.

1.5. Citizen-led renovation focus, services and technologies

ENERGENT concentrates on supporting energy-efficient renovations of privately owned homes. Their approach involves coaching citizens throughout the renovation journey, offering technical guidance while ensuring sustainable choices, such as avoiding non-climate-friendly insulation materials. Although foundational energy-saving actions remain the focus, ENERGENT is preparing citizens for future possibilities like smart device controls. An essential element of ENERGENT's service innovation is the use of personas, developed during CLR Phase I, which enables targeted, diversified communication adapted to different audiences. This structured approach allows ENERGENT to address a wide range of citizens effectively, tailoring support to their specific needs and knowledge levels.

Figure 1: Photovoltaic panels with the Ghent skyline

1.6 Objectives, motivation, and establishment process

ENERGENT's overarching objective is to contribute to a sustainable and climate-neutral society by facilitating the reduction of CO_2 emissions. This goal has been central to their mission from the beginning and has not fundamentally changed over time. Motivated by the urgency of climate change and the necessity of lowering household energy consumption, ENERGENT was established as a cooperative initiative. The cooperative model embodies collective citizen action and is reinforced by collaboration with local authorities and Energy Houses, which help connect ENERGENT to the broader community. The foundation of ENERGENT's activities lies in its strong belief in empowering citizens to take ownership of the energy transition through accessible, well-supported renovation pathways.

1.7 Key actors and stakeholders

Key stakeholders include Energy Houses and local municipalities, whose cooperation is vital for reaching citizens. Municipalities not only support ENERGENT by endorsing their initiatives but also benefit from ENERGENT's services, which extend their capacity to deliver energy efficiency solutions. Partner contractors form another essential part of the operational model, working directly with citizens and renovation advisors to streamline project delivery. The network of stakeholders ensures that ENERGENT remains anchored within the community it serves, fostering local ownership and broad-based support for citizen-led renovation efforts.

1.8 Organisational structure

ENERGENT is as a cooperative organisation composed of approximately 2 500 citizen cooperants. Decision-making power lies with the general assembly, which reviews and approves operational directions and annual reports. This inclusive governance structure strengthens citizen ownership and accountability, fostering trust and long-term engagement. Through its cooperative model, ENERGENT not only drives renovation projects but also promotes a culture of active citizenship and shared responsibility for achieving climate goals.

1.9 Financing

The financial model supporting ENERGENT's activities is a blend of Flemish government subsidies and contributions from participating citizens. Citizens pay a contribution that ranges between 3% and 7% of the renovation work performed. These costs are largely absorbed within the competitive prices negotiated with contractors, ensuring affordability and maintaining ENERGENT's financial neutrality. This model allows ENERGENT to prioritise environmental goals without the pressure of profit-making, ensuring that the focus remains firmly on climate impact and citizen empowerment.

1.10 Customer journey

Citizens first encounter ENERGENT through a wide variety of communication channels, including websites, social media, printed materials, and participation at local events. Collaboration with municipalities significantly boosts citizen trust and engagement, providing a strong platform for ENERGENT’s outreach efforts. Once citizens register, they are guided through a structured customer journey managed by a CRM system. For minor renovation tasks, communication happens mainly between the citizen and the contractor, while larger projects involve a dedicated energy advisor. After the renovation, participants are invited to complete an optional digital survey, and the energy advisor remains available for future questions or renewed engagements, sometimes even years later. This personalised and ongoing relationship ensures long-term citizen satisfaction and encourages further engagement with the renovation process.

2. Impact Analysis

2.1 Environmental, economic, and social benefits

ENERGENT's efforts have led to measurable environmental benefits, with approximately 5 650 tons of CO_2 saved from citizen projects alone and a total of 17 000 tons saved when including larger, municipality-led projects. These figures reflect ENERGENT's substantial contribution to climate objectives and sustainable local development, positioning it as a leader in citizen-led renovation initiatives.

Economically, participating households benefit from considerable energy savings. Measures such as roof insulation have resulted in reductions of 25% to 30% in household energy consumption, translating into tangible cost savings over time. Additionally, ENERGENT's growth has supported the local economy by creating new jobs, especially through the hiring of additional energy advisors to meet the increasing demand. This job creation not only supports the local economy but also builds technical capacity within the region.

On the social front, ENERGENT's model has strengthened community cohesion by providing personalised support throughout the renovation journey. Although ENERGENT does not specifically target vulnerable or marginalised groups, it collaborates with organisations like ROTS vzw to refer individuals requiring additional support. The structure of personal follow-up, transparent communication, and the maintenance of ongoing relationships with participants further contributes to social trust and energy literacy.

ENERGENT's service model offers more than the technical benefits of standard renovations. Participants receive both technical and emotional support, which greatly enhances their confidence and satisfaction. ENERGENT's holistic approach, combining practical guidance with tailored communication, has proven critical for scaling citizen-led renovation efforts and ensuring the long-term viability of the model.

3. Highlights of drivers and success factors

3.1 Contextual, financial, and organisational factors

Several contextual factors have played crucial roles in ENERGENT's success. The favourable political environment in Ghent and East Flanders, supported by twelve years of green party leadership and sustained climate-focused policy, created a foundation of environmental awareness among citizens. This pre-existing cultural sensitivity enabled ENERGENT to focus on facilitating action rather than investing heavily in basic awareness-raising.

Partnerships with municipalities and Energy Houses have been indispensable. Citizens' trust in public authorities helped ENERGENT amplify its outreach and legitimacy. Without municipal support, reaching the target groups and maintaining credibility would have been significantly more challenging.

The cooperative ownership model also contributed to success by ensuring that citizens had a genuine say in the organisation's operations. Financially, ENERGENT's sustainability was bolstered by the combination of public subsidies and participant contributions, which together allowed ENERGENT to function without profit-driven motives.

A critical innovation has been ENERGENT's use of personas, developed during the first CLR phase. Recognising that different citizen groups require different communication approaches, ENERGENT abandoned one-size-fits-all messaging. Instead, it crafted targeted, accessible messages that avoided overwhelming people with technical details. This nuanced communication strategy significantly increased participation rates and improved project outcomes.

Figure 2: Cover of the Personas Guide

Figure 3: Example of a "persona" taken from ENERGENT's Personas Guide

Operationally, ENERGENT's CRM system enabled a clear division of roles and responsibilities between citizens, contractors, and advisors. This transparency streamlined the customer journey, minimised confusion, and ensured consistent quality of service. ENERGENT's structured approach to managing citizen interactions has been vital in maintaining trust and delivering high-quality outcomes

4. Lessons learned and practical recommendations

4.1 Lessons learned and recommendations

One of the major lessons ENERGENT learned is that communication must be treated as a two-phase process. Before offering solutions, organisations must first invest significant effort in raising awareness and understanding among citizens about the necessity and benefits of energy renovations. ENERGENT's experience shows that without this initial awareness, even the most technically sound solutions fail to engage participants effectively. Communication requires at least as much focus and resources as building the technical service itself.

Another critical lesson is the importance of tailored communication. Through the development and use of personas, ENERGENT discovered that citizens are far more responsive to personalised and accessible messaging that speaks directly to their needs, values, and motivations. Simplifying language, avoiding technical jargon, and focusing on relatable, achievable benefits have proven far more successful than technical presentations.

Building and maintaining strong partnerships, particularly with municipalities and local Energy Houses, was identified as a decisive success factor. These trusted institutions played a key role in giving ENERGENT visibility and credibility, while also facilitating direct access to citizens who already trusted their local governments.

For CLR initiators and developers, ENERGENT strongly recommends embedding communication strategies at the heart of project planning from the very beginning. Designing excellent technical services alone is not sufficient; equal attention must be given to how these services are presented and made accessible to citizens.

For policymakers at the local, regional, national, and EU levels, ENERGENT stresses the importance of creating and maintaining an enabling environment that highlights the urgency of energy renovations, simplifies administrative procedures, and ensures the availability of supportive funding structures. ENERGENT also encourages policymakers to maintain legal and political frameworks that empower citizen-led initiatives and build long-term trust.

ENERGENT reflects positively on its participation as a Belgian pilot in the first phase of the CLR programme. Engaging with peers from across Europe provided valuable insights and inspiration, and reinforced the importance of international platforms for mutual learning and continuous improvement.

Looking ahead, ENERGENT acknowledges a temporary slowdown in renovation activity but remains optimistic. As stricter climate targets come into force, the demand for sustainable renovations is expected to rise substantially. ENERGENT is preparing to meet this growing need, continuing its active contribution to the broader energy transition.

5. Where to learn more

Additional information about the ENERGENT initiative can be found on their website. For direct contact, An Van Hemeldonck, Project and Communication Manager, can be reached at an.vanhemeldonck@energent.be or by telephone at +32 478 64 61 70. The findings presented here are based on an in-depth interview conducted as part of the Citizen-led Renovation Phase II study.