

Closing the gap – turning strategies into projects in municipalities

The "Gemeinde-Energie-Programm" (GEP) is one of Upper Austria's energy programmes for municipalities. Managed by the OÖ Energiesparverband (ESV), the regional energy agency, it boosts the implementation of local energy action plans by activating, motivating and providing technical support for concrete energy efficiency and renewable energy investments. A facilitation service with proactive contact with municipalities, onsite energy advice and individualised guidance in project planning are at its very core.

As success of an earlier programme (EGEM), 40% of all Upper Austrian municipalities (around 180 out of 440) adopted a local energy action plan with clear targets. However, a number of foreseen investment measures remained unrealised although a range of regional and national financing instruments are available. The GEP programme was specifically developed to offer targeted support to municipalities in accessing these programmes and give an extra push in triggering investments.

The programme was launched in 2017. It is embedded in a wider policy framework including regulatory measures "sticks", financial incentives "carrots" and information and training activities "tambourines", which has shown to be very successful in Upper Austria. The GEP programme was supported through the EU-funded project Publenef.



Understanding your municipalities – small projects, big impacts

As a first step, the ESV carried out a market segmentation analysis to better understand the target group (the 440 municipalities) as well as their barriers for project realisation. In Upper Austria, almost 70% of the population lives in (very) small municipalities: 36% in municipalities of under 3,000 inhabitants, 33% in municipalities of 3,000-10,000 inhabitants. In these cases, a very limited number of municipal staff needs to cover the wide range of services. This often translates in a lack of staff time, skills for project planning and knowledge of innovative financing mechanisms.

At the same time, small municipalities have interesting strengths, such as short decision-making routes and a strong sense of community (e.g. energy groups, active school groups, fire brigades or farmers organisations). Also, even just one committed staff member can have a big influence. Small municipalities have small infrastructure and thus implement small measures. Despite their limited size, these can have significant impact in energy savings and more!

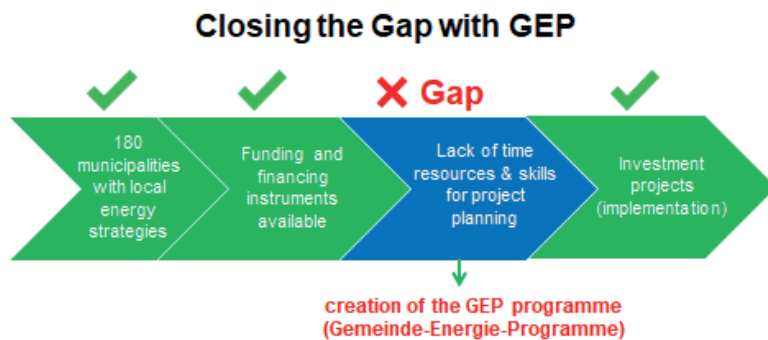
So far, the GEP programme has funded a wide range of measures in public buildings and infrastructure (such as administration buildings, schools, sports and cultural centres, fire brigade stations, public lighting, water supply and sewage, public swimming pools), for example:

- conversion to LED lighting, installation of movement sensors and timers for lighting in public buildings and streetlighting
- optimisation of heating and ventilation systems (including hydraulics), replacement of inefficient heat circulation pumps
- installation of energy control and monitoring systems
- connection to district heating
- detailed technical analysis of energy efficiency and renewable energy investments
- specialised training for technical staff

Closing the gap from commitment to action: the GEP Programme

Often, just a little guidance can help turn concepts into concrete projects. Within the GEP programme, the ESV takes municipalities by the hand, helps identify their needs and guides them to the next step of their specific projects.

Rather than taking on the time-consuming project planning process with the municipality, the programme offers "help to self-help", among others by bringing external resources into the municipality's process (e.g. by financing the hiring of a project planner). As a result, just small amounts of public funds are sufficient to trigger new investments.



Getting out there – a successful rollout strategy

Actively reaching out to all municipalities and focussing on direct contact have been key to GEP's success. A mix of communication channels are used, including on-site visits by an energy consultant (a requirement for GEP funding), information events, peer-to-peer learning in interactive workshops, information material tailored for municipalities etc. Based on the market segmentation analysis, the ESV also proactively approached municipalities that had not yet been very active in implementing energy measures. The on-site visit by an ESV energy adviser permits to assess the municipalities' energy saving potentials.

Lessons learnt

- **Small is everywhere**
Many countries also have small municipalities with small infrastructure. The GEP programme can be replicated with limited time and financial resources.
- **Using direct contact and the strength of community**
Effective rollout measures ensure the link between the region's energy goals, funding programmes and concrete investments in municipalities. The GEP programme focusses on direct contact with municipalities and relevant stakeholders and on their "sense of community" to build up momentum.
- **No "one-fits-all" financing solution**
GEP helps municipalities find the solutions that are best for them. There are many benefits in using a variety of financing models.

So much more than energy efficiency

When interviewed, municipalities were eager to report the many additional benefits they observed: increased light quality in the classrooms, healthier working spaces in municipal buildings, reduced time and costs for maintenance, taking pride in modern infrastructure, increased environmental awareness of citizens, etc. The list was long and diverse, highlighting the added value of the energy transition. Through its GEP programme, the ESV is showing how the energy transition can increase the quality of life and sense of community in municipalities as well as reduce energy and maintenance costs.

The programme at a glance

Programme name: "Gemeinde-Energie-Programm" (GEP), an Upper Austrian programme for municipalities

Main objectives: triggering energy efficiency investments in municipalities in line with their energy action plans

Barriers addressed: lack of staff and skills for project planning

Key elements:

- comprehensive facilitation service, proactive visits to municipalities, energy advice
- small funding amounts:
 - planning costs for energy efficiency and renewable investments in public infrastructure (max. 10,000 Euro)
 - information activities supporting project implementation (max. 2,000 Euro)
 - optimisation of installations (max. 3,000 Euro per installation)

Source of funding:
Regional government

Managed by:
ÖÖ Energiesparverband,
the regional energy agency

What has been achieved so far?

Municipalities supported: 130

Savings:
7,649,779 kWh/year
2,200,951 kg CO₂/year

Projects funded: 75
(about 60 completed)

Average project costs:
about 10,000 Euro
Average project funding:
about 4,600 Euro