

## Ghent, Belgium

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*Duurzame vraag? Dito aanbod!* – Sustainable demand? Sustainable supply!

The Ghent Environment Service has launched a remarkable initiative to reduce energy consumption in homes and buildings in the city. Inspired by a mounting number of requests for advice on low energy renovation from home owners and tenants, it has launched a programme to match householder demand with an more appropriate offer from the construction sector. Designers, contractors and the business community in general are stimulated to develop technical, material and affordable solutions to improve energy performance in the home. The city channels these efforts to support households in most need, by providing a concerted package of guidance, assistance and accompaniment towards a more sustainable living pattern.

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#### ***Duurzame vraag? Dito aanbod!* – Sustainable demand? Sustainable supply**

The city of Ghent has a tradition of environmental activism, so it is not surprising that it should be the first Belgian city to introduce its own Local Climate Plan. With this important addition to policy as the background, the city's Environment Service has progressively moved to initiate more active approaches to improving environmental sustainability. Prior to the project the city had already contracted an NGO to set up an environmental advice and information point called the *Milieuadvieswinkel* (Environmental Advice Shop). It was partly through mounting interest in this service, from home-owners and occupiers, that environmental officers realised the untapped potential of householders who were interested in reducing their energy consumption but unsure of the options they could take. This latent demand was coupled to a realisation that on the supply side, existing business models were not yet adapted to providing homes with ready-made ecological construction or renovation solutions.

So the *Duurzame vraag? Dito aanbod!* project was born. The project provides a full package of assistance to help families in difficulty to cut their energy consumption – by insulating their homes or modifying heating systems, for example. Together with an arm's-length agency (vzw REGent) set up by the city to reduce energy and water consumption, the Environment Service delivers comprehensive hands-on accompaniment for householders. This takes them through the eco-renovation process from initial energy scan to delivery of works. In parallel the project team has developed contacts with design and energy professionals, researchers, contractors and material suppliers, businesses and representative agencies in the construction sector, to develop and share eco-construction knowledge and techniques and establish sustainable supply models. Through training workshops based on peer-to-peer exchange and co-production of technical details and guidance documents with the sector, a new and mutually beneficial relationship between client and supplier has been established.

At the beginning of 2012 the project had already surpassed many of its targets in terms of providing construction advice and guiding families through a renovation trajectory, while the technical detail design guides (produced with voluntary input from experts and specialists) are much sought after and used by professionals and operators in the wider construction sector.

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# *Sustainable demand meets sustainable supply*

### *Moving towards the carbon neutral city*

Ghent is a bustling vibrant city, a city of cyclists and culture with an extensive public transport network, a city of social contrast with a historic centre and problematic 19<sup>th</sup> century workers' neighbourhoods, a thriving city in economic terms with high levels of employment and paradoxically high unemployment (approaching 10%), when compared to the Flemish average.<sup>1</sup> It is a city whose population has grown steadily since 1990, partly through natural growth but also due to an influx of migrants. Almost 44% of dwellings are occupied by single-person households and it has the greatest number of students in higher education in Belgium. City politicians and officers are therefore alive to opportunities – but equally confronted by critical challenges.



Ghent is also a front-runner in addressing environmental issues. It is an active signatory of the Covenant of Mayors, but this has been only an extra impulse for a city which was already well on the road to sustainable urban development. In 2008 the city produced its Local Climate Plan (2008-2020)<sup>2</sup> setting out 105 actions to create an energy neutral city, based on:

- concretely evaluating the climate impact of the city and its organisation
- taking an exemplary position in relation to energy management of public buildings and street lighting
- stimulating inhabitants and users of the city to reduce energy consumption
- decreasing inner-city traffic levels and promoting environmentally friendly transport
- creating more green space and woodland in and around the city

The plan warns of the need for realism in terms of the feasibility – both technical and financial – of certain proposed measures, and recognises the advantages of building in flexibility to adapt to changing developments and opportunities. It is framed within an even longer-term vision on the part of the local authority – a horizon of 2050.

This focus on sustainability is the result of a tradition of environmental activism, but is not a policy that has been developed in isolation. As Indra Van Sande, the initiator of the project *Duurzame vraag? Dito aanbod!* ('Sustainable demand? Sustainable supply!') emphasises, 'Climate is economy' and the potential for new businesses and jobs in a new market sector is an agreed path to be exploited. Similarly, recent urban development, neighbourhood

<sup>1</sup> *Socio-economic profile Ghent and surroundings*, 2008 Ghent Department of Work and Economy  
<http://www.investingent.be/dmdocuments/Socio-economisch%20profiel%20van%20Gent%20update%202008.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> *Lokaal Klimaatplan Gent 2008-2020*, Stad Gent (Local Climate Plan – 105 actions for a climate neutral city.  
<http://www.gent.be/docs/Departement%20Milieu,%20Groen%20en%20Gezondheid/Milieudienst/20080605%20Lokaal%20klimaatplan%20Gent%202008-2020%20105%20actiepunten.pdf>

regeneration and housing policies all incorporate the principles of sustainable intervention. In a housing study commissioned by the city council in 2008,<sup>3</sup> amidst recommendations to improve general housing quality for all citizens and diversify the offer in terms of tenure, location, size and type, a key feature was the exhortation to support energy-saving measures and energy responsible renovation. The project *Duurzame vraag? Dito aanbod!* which also started in 2008 with ERDF funding, falls comfortably into the logic of this evolving and integrated sustainable management approach.

### ***Making capital of an economic, social and environmental trinity***

Good practice is often the result of the cumulative building of response patterns. As part of an outsourcing agreement with an NGO, partially sponsored by the province of East Flanders, a *Milieuadvieswinkel* (Environmental Advice Shop)<sup>4</sup> was established in 2006 for the city and its citizens. Located close to the main railway station, this open office was intended to provide information and guidance and to raise awareness of environmental issues in the community.

Through the working of this service, important signals began to reach environmental officers in the city. In recent years as energy costs began to swallow an increasingly important share of household expenditure, many property owners and tenants came to ask for advice on how to reduce their energy bills. The problem and prospect of fuel poverty was especially critical for families living in the more disadvantaged neighbourhoods, the districts of workers' housing which form the 19<sup>th</sup> century extension around the historic centre, for example. The city council's Environment Service recognised that giving advice was a valuable first point of contact but that this in itself would not mobilise significant numbers of householders to take real steps. With looming global recession, 2008 was to become a tipping point for Ghent in this policy area. Objectives set out in the Local Climate Plan and the results of a city-wide housing study, which recommended a programme of affordable housing construction and renovation, were combined to focus attention on retrofitting and ecological construction. The city extended its environmental instrumentation by setting up vzw REGent, an arm's-length agency incorporated as non-profit organisation, to promote reduced energy and water consumption by property owners and tenants.



**The Ghent *Milieuadvieswinkel***

A framework was then in place for the Environment Service to start a programme to support families and property owners in the process of conserving energy in their homes and buildings, particularly householders living in difficult housing and economic situations. However scoping of contractors and design professionals to underpin this campaign quickly suggested another critical difficulty to be overcome. On the supply side it was immediately evident that the local building sector could not respond effectively to any new sustainable building demands because of technical, knowledge and product deficits. This almost unexpected obstacle, together with the possibility of European support, opened a path for the Environment Service to try to bridge the gap. It worked up an integrated project which simultaneously addresses the needs of a social target group while stimulating professionals

<sup>3</sup> Gent Housing Study (summary), *Gentse Woonstudie 2008*, city of Ghent

[http://www.gent.be/docs/Departement%20Ruimtelijke%20Planning,%20Mobiliteit%20en%20Openbaar%20Domein/Dienst%20Stedenbouw%20en%20Ruimtelijke%20Planning/beleid/20090424\\_derde%20versie%20bailleul%20300dpi\\_WEB.pdf](http://www.gent.be/docs/Departement%20Ruimtelijke%20Planning,%20Mobiliteit%20en%20Openbaar%20Domein/Dienst%20Stedenbouw%20en%20Ruimtelijke%20Planning/beleid/20090424_derde%20versie%20bailleul%20300dpi_WEB.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.milieuadvieswinkel.be/index.php/id/669>

and enterprises in the wider construction sector. The project *Duurzame vraag? Dito aanbod* was designed to achieve environmental goals by tackling housing regeneration on one hand and business and job creation on the other. It thus unites the three pillars – social, economic and environmental – of sustainable urban development.

### ***The learning curve: a project in two phases***

A first application for ERDF funding was successful in 2008 for a period of two years. The 40% European contribution of €113 470 was matched by 40% from the Flemish region, 5% from the province of East Flanders and 15% from the city of Ghent. This allowed the Environment Service to programme six priority actions working on both sides of the demand and supply equation. Largely building on the existing cooperation with the *Milieuadvieswinkel* and exploiting the relationship with the newly formed association REGent,<sup>5</sup> the project set out to intensify the offer of advice and support to householders. Through the *Milieuadvieswinkel* individuals, schools and organisations such as youth clubs could take advantage of three hours of free advice on eco-construction and eco-renovation. This initial opportunity to explore energy-saving options, primarily in the home, was tailored to the circumstances of each client or client group – sometimes explaining simple low-cost solutions such as draught sealing, heating pipe insulation or applying silver foil behind radiators, but generally attempting to find a way that families could sign up to an effective package of structural measures to fit their own situation and needs. In addition this contact was an important way of identifying householders who could be channelled into a process of accompaniment organised by REGent.

This independent agency was initially built around the secondment of environmental and social welfare officers from the city's Environment Service and Public Centre for Social Welfare. The organisation provides more detailed advice, but its main job is to help householders and families in difficult socio-economic circumstances to renovate their homes and reduce their energy consumption (and therefore their energy bills). Although advice and limited support are open to all, REGent has a mandate to provide intensive one-to-one follow-up for a specific target group – people whose income is less than €27 200 a year. From an initial introduction and energy scan (a collaboration with the energy delivery company), REGent's specialists can follow an applicant through the whole trajectory of sustainable home renovation: highlighting options and signalling priority interventions,



**REGent's Eco-friendly office**

contacting and engaging contractors, providing technical implementation advice, and guiding access to grants and loans available from different agencies at different administrative levels (federal, regional, city, energy company). The Environment Service has also organised the group purchasing of roof insulation to give this target group an extra helping hand.

So the service follows through from initial idea to delivery of the works. REGent can also support its clients by offering limited and targeted grants of up to €1 000, and low-interest,

low-threshold loans of up to €10 000, made on feasible pay-back terms.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.vzwregent.be/>

## Supply chain pools its skills

In coordination with the approach to citizens and neighbourhoods, the Environment Service began to operate with representatives of the construction sector – designers, building contractors, suppliers, representative organisations in construction and enterprise, researchers – to build knowledge and capacity on eco-construction and eco-renovation. It also wanted to raise awareness of the opportunities and the latent demand among all sectors of the city population for market support in this area. Tapping into a wide network of stakeholders, it organised meetings to raise awareness across the sector, culminating in the setting up of *ecobouwpools* ('eco-construction pools'), exchange and training workshops allowing the peer-to-peer transfer of knowledge and techniques. Guides and brochures on specific aspects of sustainable construction and retro-fitting were developed, such as the technical detail design guide *Passiefwoningen in houtskeletbouw* ('Passive wood frame housing')<sup>6</sup> which was co-produced with experts and specialists in the field, and targeted to fill knowledge gaps and respond to need.



Technical detail guide



Brochure: Milieuadvieswinkel – 3 hours' free advice

During this first phase, the project provided free advice on sustainable measures to 600 households, supported 320 low-income families in planning a full renovation trajectory towards a cheaper and more sustainable housing situation, and engaged 150 construction professionals to participate in eco-construction workshops. The booklets providing technical details for architects, construction firms and handymen have been widely solicited, and even people and organisations from France and the Netherlands have shown interest.

A benchmark had been set in making progress towards changing practices and habits. The way the Environment Service works with a wider network of organisations – the city economy and housing departments, the Public Centre for Social Welfare, active sector stakeholders and bodies, Milieuadvieswinkel and vzw REGent – has clearly established a new dynamic in this field across the city and beyond. The Environment Service initiated a successful pilot project to provide free advice on sustainable measures for households, using ERDF funding to extend the operation. Today some 15 other municipalities in East Flanders have adopted this practice. The positive results and reactions confirmed the continuation of what had now become a programme of actions and interventions, inspiring a second application for ERDF funding to intensify activities between 2010 and 2012. The

<sup>6</sup> Information on sustainable technical construction details:

<http://www.gentsklimaatverbond.be/bedrijven/handleiding-laagenergetisch-en-passief-bouwen-voor-professionals>

possibility to access another slice of funding has been extremely important, particularly in terms of ongoing coordination, prospecting and awareness raising, and the city is committed to delivering sustainable neighbourhood regeneration and social improvement. In the case of vzw REGent, the decision to continue to build on this dynamic has already been taken by the executive committee in respect of its 2012-2014 business plan.

### *Applying new methods*

By its very nature the project has never been static. The capacity to link into departmental policies (economy, housing, social) and react to developing markets and opportunities, through contact with a wide stakeholder network, is reflected in an openness to 'add on' newly measures and exploit unforeseen but valuable opportunities. The transition from the first to the second phase of the project was an ideal chance to reappraise and re-orientate project activity. For instance the ambition to actively involve schools and organisations such as youth clubs proved difficult to achieve because of governance and management structures. So while the project is still open to any such organisation it was decided not to invest more effort in mobilising this sector.

A clear position was taken to broadly continue the actions carried out in the first phase but with some important nuances, and a desire to intensify activity to support the social target group. Much of this work focuses on the ring of 19th century workers' neighbourhoods which surround the historic inner city – and these have also been the prime target for city regeneration efforts. So there is additionality to be achieved in improving seriously poor housing conditions in neighbourhoods which are low-income, but which often accommodate vibrant communities (both young and old people from the Turkish, Moroccan and eastern European populations). In this respect a major double challenge continues to feature as a spur for the project team: firstly they aim to make contact with client groups in need of housing renovation, who may be constrained by language or personal factors – exclusion from the labour market, economic difficulty, health, age etc.). Secondly they aim to convince them of the utility and financial feasibility of signing up for sustainable housing improvement measures.

Here the project relies on referral from the wider social service network (e.g. the Public Centre for Social Welfare) so that clients can benefit from three hours of free advice from an architect specialised in eco-construction, or be channelled into the programme of process accompaniment ('cradle to grave' renovation trajectory), or sign up for the group purchase scheme for loft insulation. Here the Environment Service is trying to lower the threshold for this type of intervention by helping to organise a group purchase (good contractor, fair price search). Info-sessions are organised to explain the benefits of installing an 18 cm layer of insulation rather than the legal standard of 12 mm. Clients are also offered personal advice and assistance with installing loft insulation, and accompaniment through the whole installation process if they choose to work with a contractor. These actions are to be continued and deepened in the second funding period, but REGent is going further, as Hilde Van Hecke explains: 'We are also ready to offer a system of group purchase for high performance (double/triple) glazing and we are linking up with the 'odd-job' service KarWIJdienst (a job creation initiative sponsored by the Public Centre for Social Welfare) to provide low-income home owners with trained tradesman to install loft insulation at an affordable cost.' In its follow-up role, REGent actually encourages people to apply 24 cm of insulation or more, and offers advice on the bulk purchase of cellulose (rather than glass wool) insulation, which can be blown into prepared cavities straight from the lorry, and reduces material cost by up to 25%.

This demonstrates that constant adaptability and evolution are strong assets – a principle that can similarly be seen in the application of a new night heat loss tool which uses computer imaging to show people how heat escapes from their own home, but also builds their understanding and encourages them to take up the support that is on offer. The need for continual awareness raising and follow-up is a key strategy in a situation where in 2008

(when the project started) it was estimated that only 50% of homes in the city had some form of roof insulation.

### ***The industry picks up the baton***

On the supply side there was a curious development during the first project phase concerning the organisation of the 'eco-construction pool' workshops. They started well, with keen interest and participation from professionals and representatives of construction companies, suppliers and overarching sector and business organisations. It was also evident however that engagement declined over the transition period from phase 1 to phase 2 of the project. As Flora Van den Heuvel of the city Environment Service suggests: 'we have perhaps become victims of our own success.' The idea was apparently quickly taken over by organisations such as building confederations and entrepreneurs' unions. So nowadays the Environment Service is often invited to contribute to workshops organised by other agencies rather than maximising attendance at its own events. This might be construed as weakening the initiative of the city, but on the other hand a more accurate interpretation is that the message is being spread to a much wider audience than originally envisaged. Involving these organisations was a significant tactic in a situation where five years ago it was almost impossible to buy products like airtight tape or foil locally. The client base and even international contacts of such bodies have given the Ghent initiative a high level of visibility across the country.

It is also probably true that the project's outputs, whether workshops or technical guides, have significantly raised knowledge and capacity levels, building on parallel initiatives by research and professional platforms. There is a limit to how much further this can go, and the project has recognised this and is now putting more effort into working with local businesses such as bakers and printers, to convince them to adapt their premises and production activities to respect state of the art sustainability standards. Here again the project's flexibility and forward-looking approach confirms its relevance and real utility.



### ***Bridging the gaps to provide sustainable housing***

Taking a stroll through any of the 19<sup>th</sup> century districts in Ghent immediately makes you aware of the difficulties the physical fabric presents and the precarious conditions in which some members of the community live. There are also clear and positive signs of revival which are a credit to the efforts made by the city and its regeneration partners (and citizens) through projects like *Ledeberg leef!* (Ledeberg lives).<sup>7</sup> The *Duurzame vraag? Dito aanbod!* project is almost a logical extension of these ongoing initiatives, but provides extra impetus

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.gent.be/gent.htm?id=137253&ch=WLB>

to implement renewal in an ecologically responsible way, involving the end-users in shaping their own living space. As a young couple starting out on the property ladder in a small two storey and attic terrace house enquired: 'We want to do some of the work ourselves, is this possible or do we lose the value of renovation subsidies?' The fact that the city of Ghent has produced a booklet<sup>8</sup> which sets out in simple terms all sources of grant aid for homes in the city is so useful (these include federal, regional, city, REGent and energy suppliers). But that this can also be translated by someone from the Milieuadvieswinkel or vzw REGent to the real client situation in the home, and possibly even accompanied by some financial assistance, represents an exceptional added value in a very complex discussion of eligibility and accumulation possibilities.



**First advice after energy scan**



**Working with the odd-job service KarWIJdienst**

The project has responded to specific demands arising out of the community and was able to tailor its action programme to the particular needs and expectations of the clients, both householders (particularly those in difficult socio-economic situations) and producers and designers of sustainable solutions. The project team thinks that this customising of solutions to fit the applicant is one of the real strengths and learning points of the project. Group purchasing<sup>9</sup> has been a particularly effective tool to get people to take real concrete action in their homes. The full-time operation of two renovation teams as part of a job-creation scheme set up by the city Public Centre for Social Welfare is a win-win situation which provides skills training and access to full employment and at the same time a professional, low-cost service to householders. REGent's Geert Abts added an extra dimension to this: 'There is a healthy tension in the fact that two teams of workers are dependent on the work that I and my colleagues do to engage and support householders, and this focuses our attention even more.' Perhaps the most effective and innovative element of the whole project is the consideration given to whole chain solutions, for instance in the case of process accompaniment. This means that there is effectively a one-stop-shop rather than a set of fragmentary opportunities to access one piece of information, one action area, one financial support channel or one departmental responsibility.

On the supply side the momentum has been set and we might assume that adaptation to sustainable practices will to a certain extent be self-generating, with less need for outside stimulus until a new period of flattening out is reached. On the other hand expertise to reinforce the message of construction details, new techniques and more efficient and ecological materials can still present an important role for the project team in the future.

<sup>8</sup> Housing subsidies in Ghent 2012 (*Woonpremies in Gent*) – city of Ghent updated 2012  
<http://www.gent.be/docs/Departement%20bevolking%20en%20Welzijn/Dienst%20Huisvesting/Premieboekje.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.gent.be/groepsaankoopdakisolatie>

### *Linking the pillars of sustainability*

The integrated working between the Environment Service of Ghent and vzw REGent, with outsourcing of defined tasks to the Milieuadvieswinkel, is an effective extension of previous structural relationships between city departments and service providers. The degree of interaction, because of this, becomes almost invisible to the outsider, but the seemingly casual management and implementation structure disguise an effective governance model with branches to all the appropriate stakeholders and partners. There is an element of mutually understood subsidiarity in the relationship between managing authority and city, with the project team taking responsibility for meeting its own objectives. This conscious adoption of responsibility is a feature of the cooperation between different city departments, where new opportunities to make contact with stakeholders were developed through the work of the NGOs and particularly in the process accompaniment for the social target group. This has been both new and enriching for the process as a whole, effectively cutting reaction time and increasing flexibility of response. The project has developed innovative ways of delivering services by maximising the effect of existing tools and practices (both in communication and implementation) but putting these together in a full package with new initiatives like householder accompaniment, which link the needs of the citizen to what is available in the market place. There will surely continue to be difficulties in reaching out to client groups and mobilising contractors, as only a fraction of the householders who are contacted actually go on to carry out a renovation. However the idea of solving environmental problems by coupling economic motivations with social needs is a model worthy of careful consideration.

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