

Overview

This research package explores the interplay between a housing association and their tenants regarding experiences of energy vulnerability. Energy vulnerability is where households are at risk of, or actually experiencing, fuel poverty. We view energy vulnerability as resulting from a range of factors shaping the relationship between energy expenditure and income (see Figure 1).

Housing associations are often identified as important actors in tackling fuel poverty with the ability to help their tenants in a number of ways. Equally, existing research suggests the agency of social housing tenants is often limited.

Despite improvements to the social housing stock's energy efficiency over the last decade, many tenants still struggle to keep their houses warm: 23% report an inability to heat their homes sufficiently (EHS Fuel Poverty Dataset, 2013).

RP7 explores the multiple ways energy consumption is shaped by housing associations and their tenants. It is based primarily on in-depth qualitative interviews with 15+ tenants and 10+ housing association staff members.

Emerging Findings

Initial findings suggest housing associations focus on improving their properties' energy efficiency and energy technologies such as new boilers. However, this appears to have a limited effect in helping those on the lowest incomes and can even exacerbate vulnerability, e.g. through higher bills from renewable technologies.

Many low income households have limited agency in terms of changing their energy situation apart from the managing their consumption. Rationing and self-disconnection therefore become key strategies for those experiencing affordability issues, including amongst those who may not be defined as 'fuel poor' by official measures.

Low income households unable or unwilling to participate in the energy market tend to be labelled as 'inactive'. However, our emerging findings suggest that these households are often highly active and conscious in the day-to-day management of their energy consumption.

The energy vulnerability 'assemblage'

Based on a literature review the energy vulnerability 'assemblage' is shown in Figure 1. This highlights the multiple dimensions of energy vulnerability and different aspects of strategies households can use to cope with it.

At the centre of the assemblage is the relationship between energy expenditure and income, the key elements of most fuel poverty definitions. The diagram also indicates a wider range of elements, many of which are often beyond the immediate control of households in social housing.

These wider elements can be grouped into four 'spaces': (i) energy technologies within the home, (ii) the ability to participate in energy markets, (iii) the ability to increase income, and (iv) the ability to control overall consumption.

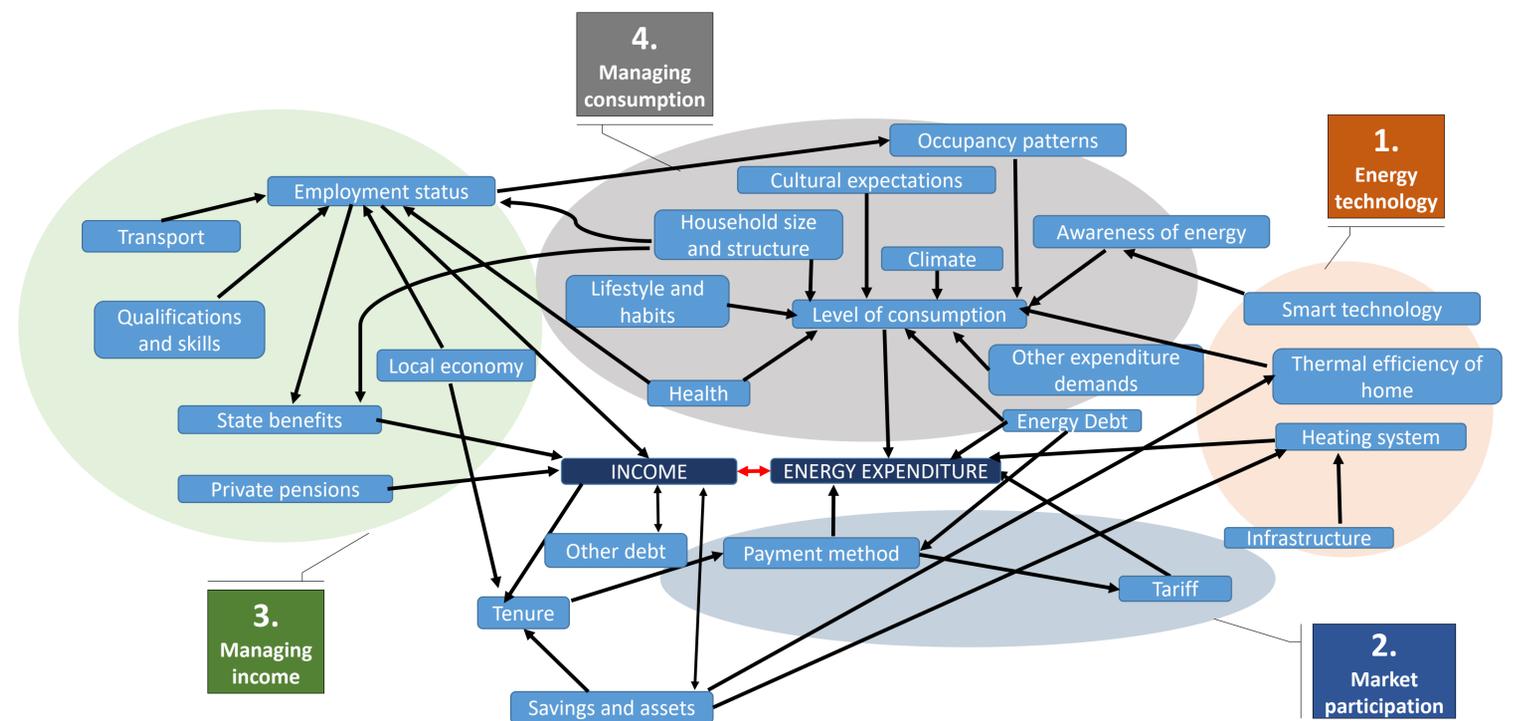


Figure 1: The Energy Vulnerability assemblage