

Peer support needed for abandoning oil heating, says Finnish researcher

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In the study, the owners of oil-heated single-family houses were well aware of various alternatives to oil heating and the subsidies offered for a switch. However, they needed more practical measures and unbiased information to realise the energy transition. Credit: Elina Raukko

Energy poverty denotes difficulties in meeting basic needs caused by the price of energy. Low-income residents of sparsely populated rural areas

living in old houses have already been identified as one of the groups at risk of energy poverty.

The risk is exacerbated by tightening energy-efficiency requirements, which in practice mean a range of renovation needs. According to the Finnish government program, single-family houses should switch from fossil oil to other forms of heating by the beginning of the 2030s.

"However, monetary support measures, such as subsidies for switching heating forms, increased tax credits for household expenses or potential new energy self-sufficiency loans, are not enough to attract everyone to abandon oil heating," says Tuija Kajoskoski, who is completing a [doctoral thesis](#) on energy vulnerability at the University of Helsinki.

'Tempting but impossible'

From January to April 2022, Kajoskoski interviewed people living in oil-heated single-family houses in sparsely populated areas who were doubtful about relinquishing oil heating.

Some of the interviewees were not at all interested in switching to another form of heating, while others said that, for one reason or another, they were unable to carry out the switch, even if it was, in principle, attractive. Those interested in switching were primarily hindered by their financial situation.

"Geothermal heat seemed to be the most interesting option, but that can easily cost €20,000 or more. In such cases, an investment subsidy of €4,000 does not make much difference," Kajoskoski notes.

Low-income pensioners are in a particularly difficult position. If the value of the house is low or if it is estimated to be close to the end of its lifespan, a pricey energy renovation is not considered an option.

In contrast, [young people](#) could very well be interested in interest-free loans guaranteed by the government.

"Loan guarantees could inspire them, and perhaps even older individuals whose house is not nearing the end of its useful life."

Practical experiences needed

For many, oil heating is a markedly preferred option.

"It's considered technically fit for purpose, as the equipment is long-lasting and functions well under the varying weather conditions in Finland. Chores related to oil heating, such as the monitoring of oil quantity and the maintenance of the burner, had become such a routine for many that they were not considered a problem. The interviewees also found that oil heating has been a relatively inexpensive form of heating. Many also had, for example, a fireplace enabling them to limit oil consumption."

The interviewees were well aware of various alternatives to oil heating and the subsidies offered for a switch. In other words, information has been successfully disseminated, but more practical measures and unbiased information would be needed to realize the [energy transition](#).

"The energy costs of various systems are not easy to assess or compare, and the transition to new systems always involves uncertainty and a certain amount of suspicion. In fact, owners of single-family houses should be offered experience-based support to enable them to familiarize themselves with what it is like to switch the heating system and how new technical solutions work in practice," Kajoskoski says.

Open-house events have indeed been found to serve this purpose well, with people who have carried out energy renovations introducing their

new equipment and the experiences gained.

A chance for an energy transition for everyone

Professor Eva Heiskanen from the University of Helsinki's Center for Consumer Society Research is well versed in the pitfalls associated with the energy transition and the related discussion.

"At the start of the energy transition, support was provided to pioneers who had the courage to switch to geothermal heat or purchase an electric car. I don't want to criticize these subsidies as such, since they were not originally intended to even out income distribution, but to open up the market and, consequently, generate demand. However, we have now reached the stage where the energy transition affects society as a whole. The focus of support measures should also be shifted from pioneers to everyone."

Heiskanen believes that, in the visions of the politicians who are guiding these measures, consumers are at least middle-class.

"Politically, we have not, in a way, acknowledged that people have different life situations. Today, people living in [rural areas](#) in particular seem to feel that they are not taken into consideration in energy policy. According to surveys, many in rural areas feel the discussion on [climate policy](#) to be focused on heaping blame on certain people. Many of them think they are already living ecologically, even more so than people in urban areas."

However, Heiskanen does not believe that policymakers intentionally wish to bring things up in a disrespectful manner. The wide differences between living environments have resulted in politicians not necessarily being familiar with people in different life situations.

"Nevertheless, the climate issue is common to us all, and a wider variety of people should be increasingly listened to in policymaking as well. At the moment, consideration is being given to whether the energy transition could be made an increasingly shared issue by reshaping both policy instruments and the style of communication."

Provided by University of Helsinki

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