**Mutual Learning Services**

**Peer Review on "Housing exclusion: the role of legislation?"**

Czechia (online event), 08-09 October 2020

**Executive Summary**

This Peer Review discussed effective social housing policies, aiming to provide adequate and affordable housing for vulnerable groups and to eradicate homelessness and housing deprivation. Participants reflected on the different models of social housing present across EU Member States, their different regulatory frameworks, allocation and targeting mechanisms, funding instruments and the role of local and regional actors and local communities. On EU level, access to social housing is in line with Principle 19a of the European Pillar of Social Rights,[1] which establishes that 'access to social housing or housing assistance of good quality shall be provided for those in need'.

The Peer Review was hosted by the Czech Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. It brought together government representatives from the host country (Czechia) and six peer countries (Bulgaria, Italy, Lithuania, Norway, Cyprus and Latvia). In addition, representatives from the European Commission and Housing Europe, as well as a thematic expert who put the topic in the wider context of EU policy, were also present.

Despite the strategy 'Social Housing Concept of the Czech Republic 2015-2025' by the Czech Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, there is no legal national framework on social housing. To inform the development of social/affordable housing legislation in the host country, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and 16 Czech municipalities implemented the 'Social Housing Support Project',[2] co-funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) that runs from 2016 to 2022. The project aims for local social housing solutions and good practice sharing between the local authorities and has resulted so far in the provision of 470 flats and supported more than 2,000 individuals.

**Key policy messages from the Peer Review can be summarised as follows:**

*Effectiveness of social housing schemes: the role of legislation*

• Political will at national, regional and local level, as well as acceptance and awareness by the general public are important elements for the success in implementing social housing policies. Approaches to provide social housing should be integrated with social support and long-term, in order to support tenants consistently, but also to build up expertise amongst professionals and communities. In turn, policy-making on housing and legislation should be backed up by evidence on effectiveness and efficiency, which is often generated at local level, such as in the 'Social Housing Support Project' that has been evaluated and can showcase good results.

---

[1] https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights_en

[2] http://socialnibydleni.mpsv.cz/en/

- Legislation on social housing sets common standards, a monitoring framework, should secure funding, and can steer the implementation of effective social housing allocation. Next to different terms and approaches, legislation across Europe differs, for example, in that some countries guarantee 'universal access' to their social (public) housing sector, while others set criteria to regulate access, such as eligibility based on income or specific vulnerabilities. Moreover, there is also a policy debate on which angle housing legislation should take: whether it should focus firstly on fighting social exclusion, or focus more broadly on increasing the affordable housing stock.

- An integrated approach to social, public and affordable housing in legislation and local implementation can address political and societal tensions regarding housing. This 'scales' housing from emergency, temporary, social to affordable (such as via social rental agencies, mixed ownership schemes) solutions, providing a set of housing 'options' for a diverse population. This and inclusive spatial planning tackles segmentation and stigmatisation, creating socially diverse neighbourhoods and enhancing social cohesion. Needs-based eligibility criteria for social housing can provide access to groups who face difficulties on the open housing market.

- In order to implement an integrated approach to social, public and affordable housing, the wider policy framework needs to be considered, such as acts regulating the rental market, social work, spatial planning (including access to quality drinking water and sanitation and efficient, affordable energy), as well as construction regulations. For example, to increase social housing stock while avoiding segregation, some Member States have mandatory rules that a proportion of social/affordable housing must be included in new buildings. This also requires good cooperation with developers and private stakeholders (for instance, through tax deductions, provision of municipal land, or other types of support given through municipalities).

### Cooperation between local and national authorities in social housing

- At national and local level, communication and coordination between different stakeholders informs policy-making, and ensures a more effective implementation on the ground. Given the links to other policies and its multidisciplinary nature, there are many stakeholders involved in the social housing field (such as municipalities, NGOs, housing stock owners, energy providers, tenants, urban planners, community groups, users/experts by experience, or policy makers). Coordination at the central level ensures links to other policy areas. In Czechia, for instance, three ministries (the Ministry of Development, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and the Ministry of Finances) cooperated in the 'Social Housing Support Project'.

- It is also essential to set roles and responsibilities between different governance levels. While municipalities are in a better position to know the needs of the population, the national intervention can guarantee coordination, common quality and access standards across the country to provide long-term solutions, funding and set a reporting framework. In Czechia, social housing is highly decentralised, which makes it crucial to understand how the State can support and set up the right incentives for municipalities. Housing policy is also decentralised in Bulgaria, Italy and Norway, which face similar problems stemming from the lack of a common framework.

### Funding of the effective implementation of legislation on social housing

- There are several funding mechanisms in place to increase the (often insufficient) housing stock and maintain social housing provision at local and national level. Housing stock is mostly funded by rent revenue, loans and subsidies. For example, in Italy an investment bank of the Ministry of Finances co-funded by foundations,

private pension funds, and insurance groups funds social housing units. The European Regional Development Fund is the main EU instrument to fund social housing, but it is essential that national programmes are planned for its use to this end. In addition, accountability paired with clear roles and responsibilities in the use of public funds for social housing avoids corruption and ensures efficient use (for this, transparent public procurement rules are particularly important).

- Governments often incentivise private developers, and are responsible for setting clear rules to incentivise more public investment to implement the above mentioned integrated approach to housing, while ensuring that funding is not steered away from the most disadvantaged. This can be also addressed by developing clear eligibility criteria for affordable housing, and steering capacity building in public procurement by municipalities.

- In decentralised countries, obligations to local administrations to guarantee access to social and affordable housing needs to be backed up by sufficient funding from the central level, and the national level should address potential regional inequalities. Finally, the societal and fiscal cost of not providing affordable and adequate housing for everyone should be factored in when making the financial case for affordable and for social housing and to increase public awareness.

### *Supporting and empowering service users*

- Local authorities should play a key role in terms of informing service users about the various support options. Asking for help should be made as simple as possible, including for instance when faced with the risk of evictions. For instance, in Czechia, a single contact point allows individuals to access services focussing on individual needs. In order to carry out these tasks, there is the need for well-trained social workers. In Italy, some municipalities track local social housing needs in a single contact point.

- A personalised approach also makes it necessary for different social, health, employment or childcare services to cooperate. In order to provide needs-based support, to reduce homelessness or to avoid evictions, for example, social services can also act as a guarantor or mediator. For instance, social workers support in debt solving agreements between a tenant, municipal services, the energy provider or landlord. Moreover, cooperation with housing co-operatives, tenants and local authorities can develop new housing solutions.

### *Working with local communities*

- In order to implement an integrated approach to social, public and affordable housing it is crucial to work with communities and their different groups. Here, experts by experience should inform planning processes with their experience. They can also play an important role in terms of giving advice to municipalities and NGOs on different topics, including how to outreach to people in need.

- It is however often a long process for local authorities to include groups who are excluded or discriminated and find suitable ways of cooperation. Approaches of bringing different groups together can be 'round tables' for inclusive spatial planning, 'open doors' for neighbourhood visits, or 'social cafes' organised by NGOs connecting vulnerable people to services and employment opportunities.