

OPINIONS

COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

92TH PLENARY SESSION HELD ON 11 AND 12 OCTOBER 2011

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on ‘Towards a European agenda for social housing’

(2012/C 9/02)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- calls on the Member States to ensure that all citizens can afford housing by basing rent increases on an objective system which ensures moderate increases in property prices and adapting tax policy to limit speculation;
- welcomes the fact that the Commission, as previously called for by the Committee of the Regions, on 19 September 2011 proposed a new approach to enlarging the scope of the local and social services of general economic interest - including social housing - exempted from the notification requirement; points out in this connection that it is up to the Member States and local and regional authorities to define services of general interest in the context of social housing policy, and the way in which they must be made available; and also stresses that it is not within the Commission's remit to establish the conditions for allocating social housing or to define the categories of household whose basic social needs cannot be met by market forces alone;
- therefore calls for energy-related housing renovation in the context of social cohesion to remain eligible for European Union structural funds, while giving each region greater flexibility in terms of the amount of funding allocated to this activity; also believes that the Structural Funds must make effective use of the partnership principle and that the Member States must be encouraged to cooperate with local and regional authorities to set priorities and determine how the funding should be used;
- emphasises that inadequate housing conditions have a significant impact on health and that providing better housing means that residents do not have to suffer the adverse effects of overcrowded, damp, cold and poorly ventilated housing; adds that a lack of housing is a source of both stress and distress adversely affecting the quality of life, health and wellbeing for individuals, families and society.

Rapporteur Alain HUTCHINSON (BE/PES), Member of the Brussels-Capital Regional Parliament

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. reiterates its support for the Europe 2020 Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth;

2. is interested to note that the balance in housing markets has been recognised as one of the potential indicators of the macroeconomic surveillance scoreboard in the framework of the new European semester, given the importance of housing markets for increasing financial and economic stability at European level;

3. notes that high-quality, affordable housing is a basic necessity for all citizens of the European Union, and that very often it is local and regional authorities that are people's main contact for meeting this need;

4. therefore stresses that, even if the European Union has no specific competence in housing policy, it is necessary to explain the impact that European policy can have on housing, in view of i) the importance of housing in meeting the European Union's major policy objectives as set out above (economic stability, efforts to combat climate change, and social inclusion), ii) the horizontal social clause laid down in Article 9 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and iii) Article 34 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights;

5. moreover, under Article 14 of the Lisbon Treaty and protocol 26 thereto, national, regional and local authorities must retain full control in establishing their own housing policies – particularly regarding social housing – in order to ensure that housing policy, making full use of all available financial resources, continues to meet the needs of the population, with a view to maximising the ability of local and regional authorities to deal with the major challenges facing the whole EU;

6. underlines the importance of Member States taking on responsibility for housing policy and of EU policies providing a framework to achieve this objective;

7. welcomes, in this respect, the fact that the energy-related renovation of social housing and work to improve housing conditions for marginalised groups are now eligible for support from the European Union structural funds; therefore calls for this to be maintained beyond 2014;

8. welcomes the fact that the Commission, as previously called for by the Committee of the Regions ⁽¹⁾, on 19 September 2011 ⁽²⁾ proposed a new approach to enlarging the scope of the local and social services of general economic interest - including social housing - exempted from the notification requirement; points out in this connection that it is up to the Member States and local and regional authorities to define services of general interest in the context of social housing policy, and the way in which they must be made available; and also stresses that it is not within the Commission's remit to establish the conditions for allocating social housing or to define the categories of household whose basic social needs cannot be met by market forces alone;

The need for affordable, universally accessible housing in the interests of economic stability

9. agrees with the Commission that it is necessary to avoid housing bubbles forming in future, due to their impact on both social and financial stability. In this regard, the Commission's new proposed rules for a single market for mortgages, which extend to the period before the signature of the contract and aim to create an adapted framework for market actors involved in the granting of loans, should provide better protection for consumers, especially for low-income households, without making it impossible for them to access housing. Models for (supported and monitored) access to social housing already exist, and form an integral part of social housing policy that this new directive must not cut back ⁽³⁾;

10. emphasises that the economic imbalances caused by the prohibitive cost of housing are not restricted to the financial world – they also have a significant impact on household consumption patterns. Low-income households in Europe spend on average 40 % of their income ⁽⁴⁾ on housing and heating, and this percentage is increasing steadily;

11. calls on the Member States to ensure that all citizens can afford housing by basing rent increases on an objective system which ensures moderate increases in property prices and adapting tax policy to limit speculation;

12. calls for investment in social housing to be supported, and therefore for risk assessments for residential property investment to take account of the specific nature of social housing, which does not present the same risks as the rest of the real-estate sector;

⁽¹⁾ CdR 150/2011

⁽²⁾ http://ec.europa.eu/competition/index_en.html

⁽³⁾ Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on credit agreements relating to residential property (2011/0062 (COD)).

⁽⁴⁾ EUSILC 2009, Eurostat.

13. feels that the European Investment Bank (EIB) needs to increase its investment in this sector considerably, as high-quality, energy-efficient and affordable housing is a form of infrastructure for local economic development, particularly in those Member States where there is no State housing bank; it also needs to improve the terms for the loans issued, taking into account the particular need to establish a significant rental housing bank in some regions, in order to meet the requirements of the neediest members of the population who have no way of becoming property owners;

An ambitious policy to promote energy efficiency in housing, in order to achieve the energy reduction goals for 2020

14. points out that the residential sector causes 40 % of greenhouse gas emissions and is therefore a high priority in the fight against climate change; adds that to meet these objectives it is vital to improve the conditions of the housing stock built over 30 years ago, which in some European regions accounts for 70 % of the existing total; also stresses that the energy-related renovation of four dwellings creates the equivalent of one job, and therefore that the sector has a significant positive structural effect on employment, economic growth and the environment at local level;

15. therefore calls for energy-related housing renovation in the context of social cohesion to remain eligible for European Union structural funds, while giving each region greater flexibility in terms of the amount of funding allocated to this activity; also believes that the Structural Funds must make effective use of the partnership principle and that the Member States must be encouraged to cooperate with local and regional authorities to set priorities and determine how the funding should be used;

16. welcomes the European Commission's energy-saving and energy-efficiency priorities and believes that the European energy efficiency directive⁽⁵⁾ needs to be consolidated with due regard for the subsidiarity principle; urges the European Parliament and the Council to ensure that requirements to reduce energy consumption and fuel poverty have a positive impact on vulnerable households and that measures to promote renovation are specifically focused on reducing energy poverty by setting up specific national or regional funds;

17. also stresses that technical assistance facilities such as ELENA (support for drafting local energy efficiency plans) and specialised funds such as JESSICA (support for integrated urban development, making use of the structural funds) are two key tools in implementing the Covenant of Mayors (which the CoR helped to establish) and need to be renewed and boosted during the next programming period;

18. supports the Commission's approach of aiming to reduce the environmental impact of our lifestyle and economic activities, as set out in the 'resource-efficient Europe' flagship

initiative (COM(2011) 21 final), and notes that housing and spatial planning and urban regeneration policies need to play a more active role in achieving this objective;

Smart growth to meet major social challenges by adapting today's cities and housing

19. welcomes the Commission's willingness to invest in modernising the economy and giving everyone access to information and communication technologies (ICT), which are tools for active participation in society;

20. draws attention to the increasing demand for social housing from all age and demographic groups and the pressures placed on local and regional authorities in meeting the needs of varied population groups, and calls for services being developed to meet the needs of an ageing population to be closely aligned with the needs of this sector of the population and to be technically and economically affordable; notes that poverty among older people throughout Europe is increasing, and therefore calls for the new European Innovation Partnership on active and healthy ageing, which coordinates research in the field, to include a specific strand devoted to developing affordable solutions to enable older people to remain in their own homes for as long as possible, taking into account that improving conditions for access to the existing housing stock is a reasonable, viable way to reduce the need for assistance, helping people to remain in their places of residence and making it easier for them to regain a social life by boosting their personal independence;

21. reiterates that people need to be placed at the centre of pilot programmes developing the 'smart cities' of tomorrow, by including a social inclusion element and encouraging users to participate in the projects. This acknowledges their key role in transforming cities, which must guarantee social cohesion in order to be sustainable;

22. feels that more extensive programmes should be developed to encourage users to feel more 'ownership' of the technologies for constructing passive buildings and that European funding should support not only technological research but also such measures to raise the profile of these technologies and to take on board the views of users/consumers;

23. welcomes the advances in information technology and tele-care which support elderly and disabled residents in their homes;

Universal access to decent housing and living conditions to facilitate full participation in society and safeguard the fundamental rights of all Europeans

24. supports the European Union's poverty-reduction target for 2020, which requires Member States and local and regional authorities to develop ambitious implementation programmes;

⁽⁵⁾ European Commission proposal of 22 June 2011.

25. emphasises that inadequate housing conditions have a significant impact on health and that providing better housing means that residents do not have to suffer the adverse effects of overcrowded, damp, cold and poorly ventilated housing; adds that a lack of housing is a source of both stress and distress adversely affecting the quality of life, health and wellbeing for individuals, families and society;

26. calls for the housing dimension to be a mainstay of these implementation programmes and to be backed up by investments and policies to increase the supply of decent, affordable housing, including both ownership and tenancy;

27. calls for the Eurostat indicators (price, quality) on the housing element of social inclusion to be published regularly so that progress in the field can be evaluated, and for these indicators to be supplemented by regional and local statistics;

28. believes that a solution to the issue of homelessness⁽⁶⁾ must be found as a matter of urgency and that, to this end, it is necessary to coordinate the application of all policies with an impact on homelessness; in this context welcomes the Resolution of the European Parliament on *An EU Homelessness Strategy*⁽⁷⁾ and calls on the Commission to implement this without delay;

29. calls for social innovation to be supported both by the platform against poverty and by the research framework programme in order to test new forms of governance for policies aiming to improve access to housing and reduce homelessness⁽⁸⁾;

30. is interested to note the recommendations of the jury of the Consensus Conference on homelessness held under the Belgian presidency of the European Union, and draws attention to the key role of local and regional authorities in developing partnerships with the stakeholders involved and in increasing the supply of affordable housing, which is a necessary, but insufficient, condition for success in reducing homelessness;

31. maintains that a variety of housing solutions need to be developed to meet the burgeoning variety of needs, and that option to bridge between rental and private ownership should be provided, such as cooperatives, shared equity, land trust communities and such like; also urges Member States to

support local and regional authorities in maintaining and increasing the diversity of the housing supply, taking into account the mechanisms needed to update the housing stock without promoting access to ownership to the detriment of other forms of access to housing;

32. stresses that the Commission communication on social entrepreneurship due to be published in late 2011 must identify the options provided by social enterprises for increasing the supply of affordable housing;

33. emphasises, that it is important to prevent and reduce harmful differentiation in residential areas via urban and social policy measures;

34. notes that, in addition to the option of using European Union structural funds for housing for marginalised groups – a measure that should continue in the next programming period as it responds to the imperative that accommodation unfit for habitation be eradicated – the European Union structural funds also need to be better integrated (ESF/ERDF) in order to promote sustainable development in disadvantaged areas⁽⁹⁾; draws attention to the fact that the redevelopment of run-down neighbourhoods must not go hand in hand with gentrification, and that social diversity programmes should be established to promote social cohesion;

Better governance to create positive interaction between European policies and housing policies

35. urges Member States to ensure that the informal meetings of housing ministers continue to act as a forum for exchanging information and improving understanding of national policies and contexts but also for adopting positions on subjects with a major impact on national housing policy, especially its financing;

36. suggests that Eurostat be asked to produce a specific Eurobarometer on housing conditions and prices, given the importance of housing in the daily lives of citizens of the European Union;

37. suggests that the European Parliament's Urban Housing Intergroup hold regular meetings with the Committee of the Regions on the housing element of European policies, particularly in terms of urban policy.

Brussels, 11 October 2011.

*The President
of the Committee of the Regions*
Mercedes BRESSO

⁽⁶⁾ CdR 18/2010.

⁽⁷⁾ B7-0475/2011.

⁽⁸⁾ CdR 402/2010.

⁽⁹⁾ CdR 129/2011.