

France 2007

National Action Plan against Substandard Housing

Short Report



On behalf of
European Commission
DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities

The Peer Review was held in Paris (France) on 27-28 September 2007 and hosted by the French Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs. In addition to the host country, six peer countries took part: Belgium, Denmark, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania. Also participating were stakeholder representatives from EUROCITIES and the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA), together with representatives of the European Commission's DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities.

1. The policy under review

Le logement indigne (literally, “unworthy housing”) is the usual French term for substandard housing. It implies that a decent dwelling is seen as a basic human right in France these days. In fact, a statutory right to be housed was introduced on 5 March 2007. Legally, the health, safety and dignity of the occupants are the main criteria on which the fitness of housing is judged. French laws on housing were substantially updated in 2000. At the same time, an action plan for the gradual elimination of unfit housing was launched. This went nationwide in 2003, and forms part of France's National Action Plan for Social Inclusion. The housing action plan has been recognised as a priority and has also been integrated into several other inter-ministerial work programmes. The methods for achieving the objectives were defined by two national plans in 2004, “National Environment and Health Action Plan” and Plan for Social Cohesion, while the law of 2006 made unfit housing a compulsory topic within **programming documents** on:

- **Local housing programmes** (PLHs) drawn up by groups of municipalities. PLHs must pinpoint the location of unfit housing and, on that basis, define the objectives, priorities and means for remedying the situation.
- **Delegation of housing finance:** a group of municipalities or a *département* (the approximate equivalent of a county or province) can ask the State to delegate to it the distribution of public housing aid - for both public and private buildings, when renovated - on the basis of a six-year covenant.
- **Département-level action plans on housing for vulnerable households** (PDALPs).

The main **work methods and powers** include:

- **Preliminary mapping** of unfit housing, providing a *département*-level cartography of areas which might be at risk.
- **Administrative policing.** The authorities can oblige owners to carry out essential work. Targeted expropriations are possible. The occupants' right to temporary or permanent rehousing is guaranteed.
- **Public financing** for accelerated remediation of unfit, unhealthy or dangerous accommodation.
- **Increased subsidies** to both owner-occupiers and landlords, for necessary repairs.
- **Grouping of housing refurbishment operations with other structural work**, such as urban renewal.

- **Coordination** of the services concerned, by the *préfet* (the State's representative in a *département* or region), and the establishment of **local work programmes and local work tools**.
- **Cooperation** between the State and the municipalities or their groupings in areas where substandard housing is particularly widespread.
- **Partnerships** with other actors in housing, health, social inclusion, justice and the police – notably in order to combat exploitative landlords (the “sleep merchants”).

2. Key lessons and aspects of transferability

After seeing various types of housing action at first hand, the peer reviewers discussed what aspects of the French policy might be transferable to other countries, and what other lessons might be learnt. Among the key points:

- There is a clear concern to **improve housing conditions throughout the EU**. However, national conditions, systems and starting points vary considerably.
- France's emphasis on the **preliminary mapping** of possible substandard housing was generally admired. Some peer countries felt that it could usefully be built into their own practice.
- The Danish system of **administrative registers** containing detailed information on all dwellings that is constantly updated (changes or renovations have to be notified by the owner) attracted attention.
- A **full legal toolkit** is needed to tackle substandard housing. In France, some existing laws were upgraded, and after that some additional ones were brought in to complete the legal toolkit for the ambitious but successful French programme. Naturally, the legal provisions then have to be implemented in practice. This is not always the case in some countries.
- A small set of **basic housing standards** is useful. However, these will vary from one country to another in line with differences in income levels and culture.
- The French policy contains a number of **provisions aimed at supporting tenants that in the short term can be negatively affected by measures against substandard housing** that could inspire other Member States (e.g. legal provisions aimed at safeguarding the tenant's interests in her/his contractual relationship with the landlady/landlord, the provision of temporary accommodation, suspension of rent payments, counselling ...). If this kind of measures is to be fully effective it needs to be supported by the provision of adequate resources.
- **Public sector housing** has an important role to play in improving housing quality. While home ownership may be desirable in itself, it does not necessarily guarantee that owner-occupiers can afford to maintain the housing stock in good condition. This is particularly the case in the less prosperous EU countries.

- **EU partnerships to combat substandard housing.** During the Peer Review, the idea of establishing a European network on the substandard housing issue was discussed.
- As the present seminar concentrated on tackling the existing problem of substandard housing, a future meeting might focus on **prevention**.
- **Housing issues should be mainstreamed into social inclusion policy**, at the national and European levels. Housing is relevant to all social inclusion topics. Within the **EU social inclusion strategy**, housing could be a subject for special focus during one year.
- **Social inclusion concerns** should always be taken into consideration when decisions are made on **housing policy issues**.
- There is a need for **tools to evaluate the economic, social and health effects of public policy interventions on housing**. This is particularly the case for public subsidies paid to the private sector or private individuals. For example, subsidising the building work needed to enable elderly people to stay on for longer in their own homes can be expensive, but it produces savings elsewhere. **Evaluation tools could usefully be developed at the European level.**
- A good **social mix** in housing is vital. Ghettos, whether on the basis of income, class or ethnicity, are to be avoided. One policy tool for promoting a good mix is to ensure a wide geographical distribution of social housing.
- For environmental reasons, **sustainable housing** is now part of EU policy. It should be promoted at the national and local levels, but this involves human factors as well as technical ones.
- In many EU Member States a policy **shift from demolition and new building to housing remediation**, where possible (and it is not always possible), has taken place. This is for social reasons as well as economic ones. Europe's urban communities have developed over hundreds or even thousands of years. Preserving local identities and solidarities can lower crime rates, reduce isolation and promote social inclusion.