

Briefing Paper

European Charter for Housing

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Despite the decision of the European Parliament in July 2005 to make expenditure on housing renewal eligible for European structural funding, housing is a matter that is generally seen as a national rather than a European competence.

However, in April 2006 an all party group of members of the European Parliament 'Urban Logement' published proposals for a European Charter for housing that would make 'healthy, decent and affordable accommodation' a fundamental right of all European Union citizens. The Conference of Presidents of the European Parliament that consists of the European Parliament president and the chairs of the political parties have now adopted the Charter.

The Charter outlines the potential of housing policies to contribute to the social, economic and territorial cohesion in the European Union. It also stresses that sustainable urban development must be complemented by sustainable housing policies which promote energy efficiency and stem urban sprawl. The Charter urges the use of European Union funds to renovate social housing.

The Charter identifies housing as a problem in all European Union states, calls for housing to be 'integrated into the economic, social and territorial cohesion policy of the European Union' and says:

"Housing is a field at the heart of the social problems met by all European Union countries. Many European cities experience real housing difficulties such as high cost of housing or antiquated buildings, which undeniably affect the quality of life of the citizens.

"The lack of decent accommodation at a moderate price constitutes an obstacle to competitiveness, employment and social inclusion insofar as it weakens even more the most disadvantaged people. Without a proper home it becomes really difficult to find a job, study or simply live in the way that one has the right to live in Europe.

"The purpose of this proposal for a European Charter for Housing is to raise the question, at a European level, of the housing problem in Europe, an issue today largely influenced by many European decisions.

"This text also represents an opportunity to enunciate several principles, such as the right to housing, and to stress the need for the European Union to lead community policies that are able to create a favourable and incentive framework for the Member States' housing policies."

The authors of the Charter concede that:

“Housing is not a European Union competence, yet interactions between community policies and matters concerning housing are many and increasing, and show multiple dimensions.”

However, they propose that:

“In accordance with the constitutional tradition of the Member States, the right to accommodation should be set up as a fundamental right of the European Union and integrated as such in the Charter of the fundamental rights consistent with the revised social Charter of the European Council; whereas, as such, its implementation cannot be left to the sole discretion of market forces, since this right to housing can only be universal”.

The Charter states that housing is:

- A necessary good, a fundamental social right and a component of the European social pattern
- A key factor for social inclusion and protection of the social cohesion of the European Union
- A lever for economic cohesion of the European Union
- An inescapable component of European Union territorial cohesion
- A fully fledged component of the European Union’s sustainable urban development

The Charter sees the role of the European Union as follows:

“The European Union should make sure that its policies contribute to establishing a favourable and incentive framework for the Member States’ housing policies, in accordance with the Community interest... and the Union’s objectives, notably in terms of cohesion and sustainable urban development”.

Alain Hutchinson a Belgian Socialist MEP and one of the authors of the report said that housing was 'hard to find and expensive' in all the major cities of the European Union. He said:

“Our aim through this Charter is to generate awareness within the European Union and to draw the attention of Europe’s institutions to this matter and ensure that a housing policy can be developed at the level of the European institutions and the Parliament.”

The next significant step to be taken by the European Parliament is the preparation of a report on housing by the Liberal group.

Angelo Grasso, President of CECODHAS the European Liaison Committee for Social Housing, welcomed the initiative saying that the Charter represents an:

“Important step which would lead to greater knowledge of the issue at European level and help ensure that housing is taken into account more in the design of EU policies”

However he stressed that that the subsidiary rule still applies strictly to housing and that this Charter makes no attempt to transfer competencies on housing from national governments to the European Level. He said:

"Housing is, after all, a local issue which is dealt with most effectively at local level."

Claire Roumet, secretary general of CECODHAS, said that the Charter:

"States that housing is a human right and people should have an affordable place to live - it also seeks to ensure that the mortgage market makes housing affordable."

Liz Atkins, director of strategy at the National Housing Federation, said that the Charter, although not legally binding, made the case that housing had a vital role to play in wider social and economic prosperity and that:

"These are important messages that decision makers at all levels need to be aware and reminded of. European Union policies have an impact on housing and social housing providers".

The main messages of the European Charter on Housing are that:

- All European citizens should have access to appropriate housing
- There are housing problems in all member states that have a negative impact on economic development and social cohesion
- The European Union already has policies that impact on housing and objectives that can be met only if housing issues are addressed

The European Charter on Housing proposes addressing these issues through an enhanced role for the European Union in housing including the use of the structural funds for housing renovation.

A copy of the European Charter on Housing can be downloaded from the website of the International Union of Tenants at:

http://www.iut.nu/Boardmeetings/2006%20Paris/Appendices/App%2010c_Charter_ENG_060406.doc

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