

Housing

Anna Coote and Andrew Percy

Adapted from The Case for Universal Basic Services (2020), Polity Books, p. 76-87

Housing is widely acknowledged as one of life's essentials and is central to the Social Guarantee. Ensuring everyone has access to accommodation that is secure, sufficient, accessible and affordable cannot be achieved through markets alone.

Realising the Social Guarantee is likely to involve both individual/private and collective/public participation. The former would typically include a combination of capital investment and expenditure on rent, mortgage payments and maintenance, while the latter is required, through public authorities, to invest, regulate and distribute.

Markets are unlikely to produce sufficient and affordable housing unless they are shaped and managed by local and national government, using regulation, public investment and partnerships between commercial, state and other non-profit bodies. Public Asset Corporations in Copenhagen and Hamburg, and Montpellier's Special Purpose Vehicles for pooling and developing land are examples. In Vienna the city government has kept housing affordable by owning most of the land, using municipal developments and supply-side subsidies to keep costs down. Denmark levies a tax on land which is collected nationally and distributed to local government for reinvestment in housing and infrastructure. In England and Wales, a growing network of Community Land Trusts, set up by local people, develop and manage affordable housing and other local assets. There are countless initiatives in cities across Europe that aim in these and other ways to boost the supply of affordable housing¹.

Residents' experience of housing will be influenced by the quality of their

surroundings, relationships with neighbours, and how easily they can find their way to transport, jobs, schools, public services, shops, leisure facilities, and open spaces. Furthermore, where residents have some control over their day-to-day living conditions, they tend to be healthier and happier: this stems not only from being able to influence what happens to their homes and surroundings, but also from the very experience of control². Public policies can protect residents' role in decisions and support housing cooperatives and other collaborative arrangements. Housing co-ops flourish in many countries, including Austria, Denmark, Germany, Spain and Switzerland, where they run a considerable chunk of the housing stock.

Poorer households generally pay a much larger slice of their income in rents or mortgages³. So further measures are needed if housing is to be genuinely affordable for all. These may take the form of demand-side benefits, such as housing benefit in the UK (widely considered a poor use of public funds) or supply side measures, whereby prices, including rents and purchase deposits, are capped or subsidised, as is common in parts of Austria, Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands.

The social benefits of universal and sufficient housing are well documented. Poor housing conditions are associated with a wide range of health conditions, including respiratory infections, asthma, lead poisoning, injuries, and mental ill health⁴. Secure access to a decent and affordable home can contribute to wellbeing by relieving anxiety and stress, supporting employment, enhancing family and social relationships; more generally, it can make the difference between struggling and flourishing⁵.

At the same time, the housing sector is responsible for a substantial share of GHG emissions and resource use. For example, homes account for around 15% of all the UK's GHG emissions through their use of oil and gas for heating and hot water⁶. So there is great potential to improve ecological sustainability through collective measures applied at local and national levels.

Freiburg in South West Germany promotes 'urban eco-living, facilitated by a strong long-term vision, national policy frameworks and a focused commitment to change and community engagement'⁷. It has invested in renewable energy, imposed strict building standards, constructed an entire low-emissions neighbourhood, built bicycle lanes and tram lines, and pushed cars out of the city centre. Greenhouse gas emissions in the city of 230,000 people have fallen by more than 37 per cent per head since 1992, significantly better than the German average⁸. But city leaders have made it clear that meeting climate targets ultimately depends on supportive policies at national level.

As the Freiburg experience suggests, achieving universal access to sufficient housing will depend not only on integrating social and environmental policies, but also on integrating local initiatives with overarching environmental policies. The European Union's 'Green Deal', for example, calls for doubling the rate of renovating private and public buildings to improve energy efficiency, climate proofing and compatibility with the circular economy; it stipulates that particular attention should be paid 'to the renovation of social housing, to help households who struggle to pay their energy bills'⁹. The UK's Green New Deal Group has proposed large-scale investment in energy efficient and affordable homes¹⁰. The 'Green New Deal' put to the US Congress in 2019 called for all new and upgraded buildings in the United States 'to achieve maximum energy efficiency, water efficiency, safety, affordability, comfort, and durability, including through electrification'¹¹.

End Notes

¹Falk, N. and Rudlin, J. (2018). 'Learning from international examples of affordable housing'. London: Shelter.

²Marmot, M. et al. (2018) Strategic Review of Health Inequalities in England post 2010, London: Institute of Health Equity.

³OECD Affordable Housing Database. (2019). 'Housing Costs over Income'.

⁴Krieger, J., & Higgins, D. L. (2002). Housing and health: time again for public health action. *American journal of public health*, 92(5), 758–768. <https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.92.5.758>

⁵https://www.housinglin.org.uk/_assets/Resources/Housing/OtherOrganisation/good-housing-better-health-2016.pdf

⁶<https://www.carbonbrief.org/uk-homes-shockingly-unprepared-for-climate-change-says-ccc>

⁷Op cit, Falk and Rudlin, p.13

⁸Buck, T. (2019) 'Germany's Green Laboratory: how Freiburg confronted climate change', *Financial Times*, September 17. <https://www.ft.com/content/b7a6f9aa-d5f5-11e9-8367-807ebd53ab77> (accessed 31.03.2021)

⁹European Commission (2019), *The European Green Deal, Building and Renovating*. Green New Deal Group (2013), *A National Plan for the UK*, London: New Weather Institute.

¹⁰<https://greennewdealgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Green-New-Deal-5th-Anniversary.pdf>

¹¹Congressional Western Congress (2019), 'Green New Deal', 116th Congress 1st Session, H. Res. 109