



## Answer to the European Commission consultation on the Action Plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights: Specific recommendations on Principle 19 housing assistance and homelessness

**DISCLAIMER:** *This is a model response to the Commission's consultation on the European Social Pillar action plan. As part of the Greens/EFA housing campaign, it outlines some of the main areas of change we want to see when it comes to EPSR principle 19: housing and assistance for the homeless. Feel free to use it as an example should you wish to submit your own response.*

### COVID-19 context makes EU action on housing imperative

Housing has become increasingly important as a frontline defence in the COVID crisis. The pandemic has outlined the inequalities that already existed in terms of the affordability of housing, quality of housing, and access to housing for the most disadvantaged in our societies.

People without a home cannot stay home during this pandemic. We know there were at least 700,000 people sleeping rough or in night shelters in Europe before the pandemic, and homelessness is a growing problem in the EU. One that requires immediate and long-term solutions. Housing first, providing a home to people when they need it without other conditions, is one of the solutions.

For those who do have a place to call home, the financial pressures and negative economic and employment impacts of the COVID crisis risk pushing large numbers of people into serious financial difficulty. We want to avoid a situation in which people find themselves unable to meet the costs of tenancy or mortgage repayments and edge towards a tipping point of eviction and even homelessness.

Protection from evictions and homelessness is required, with member states upholding the moratorium on evictions and rent freezes seen in spring 2020 for the duration of the crisis.

We need social solidarity in the whole European Union.

Considering the Commission's announcement to present an action plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights in 2021, we call on the Commission and the Member States to make housing and assistance for the homeless one of the cornerstones of the Action Plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

#### **The European Pillar of Social Rights Principle 19**

The European Pillar of Social Rights addresses in Principle 19 housing assistance and homelessness:

**Access to social housing or housing assistance of good quality shall be provided for those in need; Vulnerable people have the right to appropriate assistance and protection against forced eviction; Adequate shelter and services shall be provided to the homeless in order to promote their social inclusion.**



## **1. Adequate shelter and services shall be provided to the homeless in order to promote their social inclusion.**

The European Pillar of Social Rights has given a strong mandate to the European Commission to act and Commissioner Schmit has on several occasions, including in the Plenary of the European Parliament, underlined the importance of taking action against homelessness.

**The European Union can act as a moral beacon and, based on its values, declare together with key stakeholders the goal to eradicate homelessness in the European Union by 2030; thereby also contributing to achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals in Europe.**

**Combatting homelessness is not an insurmountable task. Member States need to develop national homelessness strategies that combine preventive and reactive measures and put central emphasis on the provision of permanent housing to homeless people.**

**We call for an EU-level goal of ending homelessness by 2030** and call on the Commission to take stronger action to support Member States in reducing and eradicating homelessness as a priority in the context of the action plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights.

**We call on the European Commission to propose an EU framework for national homelessness strategies** and for the Commission and Member States to prioritise the provision of permanent housing to homeless people, via the widespread adoption of the principle of Housing First in the EU.

We outline some of the main priority areas of action as follows.

The European Commission and the Member States should adopt a shared framework definition and coherent indicators on homelessness in the EU, which would enable common understanding, evaluation, and assessment of homelessness throughout the EU. Reliable EU-wide data collection on homelessness is paramount.

We want to see exceptional measures to prevent homelessness and protect homeless people in the context of the COVID-19 crisis maintained as long as needed and followed up with adequate and permanent solutions.

The criminalization of homeless people and discriminatory practices used to prevent them from accessing social services and shelter that we are witnessing in several Member States are unacceptable. The Commission should not turn a blind eye and challenge these measures. We want to see an end to the criminalisation of homeless people.



**Together with the fight to end homelessness, it is high time to put an end to discrimination in the right to housing in the EU.** The EU must ensure equal treatment for all and non-discrimination in the search for affordable housing. Housing is a basic right for everyone, but not everyone has equal access at this moment.

In a political climate where LGBTI people's rights are being put under pressure, it is important to stand up for them, also when it comes to housing. According to the Fundamental Rights Agency LGBTI Survey II, of EU respondents, 14% of lesbian women, 8% of bisexual women, 6% of bisexual men, 10% of gay men, 20% of intersex people and 21% of trans people experienced discrimination when trying to rent or buy housing in the last 12 months. LGBTI people suffer from high rates of homelessness. Being expelled from the family home and suffering discrimination in access to housing are some of the main reasons for becoming homeless, in particular for young LGTBIQ people. An estimated 25-40% of young people experiencing homelessness are identified as LGBTI. The EU Commission must tackle housing barriers in its LBGTI strategy.

The Black Lives Matter protests following the death of George Floyd in the US in 2020 have also turned the spotlight on racial discrimination in the EU, with strong evidence regarding its prevalence in the housing field. The Fundamental Rights Agency's report 'Being Black in the EU' pointed out that one in five respondents of African descent (21 %) felt racially discriminated against in access to housing and that one in two respondents live in overcrowded housing (45 %), compared to 17 % of the general population in the EU-28.

We note with deep concern that the living conditions of Roma continue to be extremely worrying, with many persons often living in segregated settlements characterised by substandard living conditions. All Member States need to promote the spatial desegregation and engagement of Roma beneficiaries in housing projects, to prevent forced evictions, and to provide halting sites for non-sedentary Roma. We call on the Commission and the Member States to ensure the implementation of the Racial Equality Directive, and for the Commission to launch infringement procedures against Member States that do not enforce EU anti-discrimination legislation.

We also see that lack of affordable and accessible housing, and the lack of community-based social services mean that many persons with disabilities and older persons are practically "prisoners" in their own homes or cannot live independently. It also means that they might have to move to institutions and cannot stay in their own homes even if they wanted to.

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## **2. Access to social housing or housing assistance of good quality shall be provided for those in need**

**The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) recognises the right to social housing and housing assistance for those in need**, the rights enshrined in the Pillar now need to be turned into reality.

Member States should be allowed to invest more in social, public and affordable housing under the EU's fiscal rules. We need to see this reflected in the reform of the European Stability and Growth Pact. Funding for social, affordable, healthy, adequate and energy- efficient housing and for tackling homelessness and housing exclusion should also be provided through the EU budget.

The Commission and the Member States should ensure access for all to decent quality housing, including clean and high-quality drinking water and adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene, and to affordable, reliable and sustainable energy, hence contributing to eradicating poverty in all its forms. We reaffirm calls for an EU-wide action for a winter heating disconnection moratorium. We call on the Member States to meet the standards laid down by the World Health Organization (WHO) for adequate housing temperature, and that the revision of the air quality regulation be aligned with WHO standards.

We call on the Commission to prioritise emissions reductions through housing renovation in the social housing sector and for worst performing buildings in the Renovation Wave, while tackling inadequate housing and housing accessibility and eliminating energy poverty in order to ensure a socially just transition to a climate-neutral economy that leaves no one behind.

The investment gap in social housing stands at €57 billion per year; public investment in the sector that could boost the supply keeps falling. Too often focus is on incentives to private developers while housing support for low-income households is increasingly being given in the form of social welfare type payments.

Changes to the EU's state aid rules would enable regions and local authorities to invest more in social housing and provide all groups whose needs for decent and affordable housing cannot be met at market conditions while ensuring that funding is not steered away from the most disadvantaged. This would also contribute to creating socially diverse neighbourhoods and enhance social cohesion.

We welcome the inclusion of housing affordability in the European Semester and urge the Commission to ensure that all country-specific recommendations contribute positively to the implementation of the **principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights**. The Commission needs to refine the House Price Index indicator and to set the reference threshold for the housing cost overburden rate at no higher than 25 % of the disposable income of a household.

With sheltering in place being essential to the fight against Covid-19, it has become even more clear that the fundamental right to live in an affordable, adequate and healthy home with access to services, shops and outdoor space should be guaranteed to everybody.

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### **3. Vulnerable people have the right to appropriate assistance and protection against forced evictions**

The fact that the recovery from the Covid crisis should not be a return to 'business as usual' has been widely recognised.

We need to ensure that there is no repetition of the wave of evictions witnessed after the Global Financial Crisis of the last decade. Therefore better protection of tenants and mortgage borrowers needs to be put in place at national and local level. We now often see that housing policies are favouring home-ownership over renting in an imbalanced way and this should be changed.

We call on the Member States and regional and local authorities to put in place legal provisions to protect tenants and owner-occupiers from eviction and to ensure security of tenure by favouring long-term rental contracts as the default option, together with rent transparency and rent control measures.

Forced evictions are defined as the permanent or temporary removal against their will of individuals, families and/or communities from the homes and/or land which they occupy, without the provision of, and access to, appropriate forms of legal or other protection that are compliant with international human rights law.

Forced evictions have long been recognized as a gross violation of human rights; Whereas the restitution of pre-WWII property in some EU countries turned the tenants of these houses in a highly vulnerable category, living under permanent threat of eviction.

Exceptional measures to prevent homelessness and protect homeless people in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, notably through moratoria on evictions and disconnection from energy supply and the provision of temporary housing, must be maintained as long as needed and followed up with adequate, permanent solutions.

However, there is a need to do more and effectively prevent evictions and homelessness through an EU directive on adequate minimum income schemes and a comprehensive, rights-based EU anti-poverty strategy.

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### **4. Conclusions**

Within the Commission's action plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights, we call on the Commission and the Member States to make housing one of the cornerstones of the Action Plan of the EPSR. In this consultation response we have given plenty of examples of how the Commission can work together with the EU Member States to do so.

How we organise housing policies and the housing market is one of the areas where a new approach, putting people at the centre and their right to adequate and affordable housing above the market logic, is desperately needed. The European Pillar of Social Rights action plan can contribute to putting this in place.