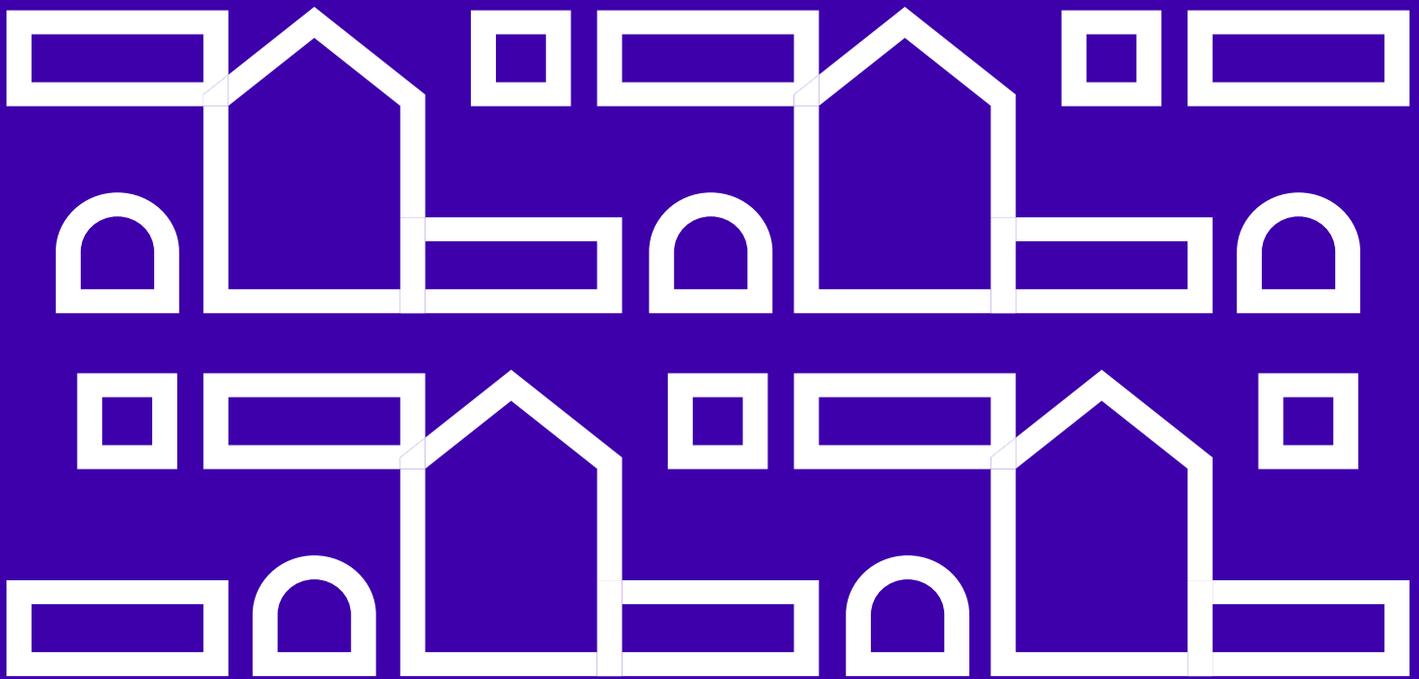# HOUSE-IN
Policy
Information #3

Discrimination against forced migrant newcomers in the housing market – challenges and possible governance responses

The responsibility to address racism and inequality and the need for anti-discrimination mainstreaming in the urban housing-integration nexus

What is this policy information about?

Research on housing has evidenced discrimination against migrant newcomers in five European cities, with diverse social and political contexts. Analysing the broader context of this discrimination confirms that this is not unique to these cities but is a widespread phenomenon, and a product of racialisation of migrants at multiple levels and the use of housing as a tool in the management of migration.

Housing and migration are closely connected. Housing and settling down play a prominent role in migrant journeys and in the process of settling. A house/shelter is considered key to migrant "integration".[1] Yet as a major resource, housing seems to have been used by governments as a migration management tool with states seeking to create a "hostile environment" to deter migration. Alongside national legislation, access to housing, and local conditions restricting housing and welfare rights of migrants, trends towards the commodification and privatisation of housing markets alongside their financialisation – which opened the doors for speculation in the housing market – have compounded difficulties and vulnerabilities experienced by migrants and also increased housing insecurity and precarity.

Knowledge elicitation: process and components

This policy brief is based on research and exchanges within the project HOUSE-IN, a JPI Urban Europe-funded research project[2] that focused on the challenges of the housing-integration nexus at the local scale with a focus on forced migrants. It brought together the expertise of researchers and practitioners of different countries and cities. The aim was to shape cross-European exchange and innovation for migrants' access to housing and social inclusion. The HOUSE-IN case studies were Leipzig (Germany), Lund and Helsingborg (Sweden), Riga (Latvia), and Vienna (Austria).

Why do we need to look at "racial" discrimination in migrant housing?

There is a lack of engagement with the issue of "race"[3] and racism in the practice, policy, and knowledge production of migrant housing options and pathways. Discrimination against migrants has many dimensions, occurs at many different levels, and presents in diverse manners during the settling down process. Different groups of migrants might be subject to different forms or degrees of discrimination. It is not a single event but a process which occurs at different stages, at different intensities, and which has multiple dimensions. For many reasons, discrimination against migrants when trying to access affordable housing is not often reported, and a lack of clear sanctions against discriminatory practices means that it is often left unchecked and even tacitly sanctioned. There is a need to mainstream reflexivity around racial othering and discrimination in relation to access to housing, institutions and structures that govern them, particularly when dealing with migrant and newcomer housing.
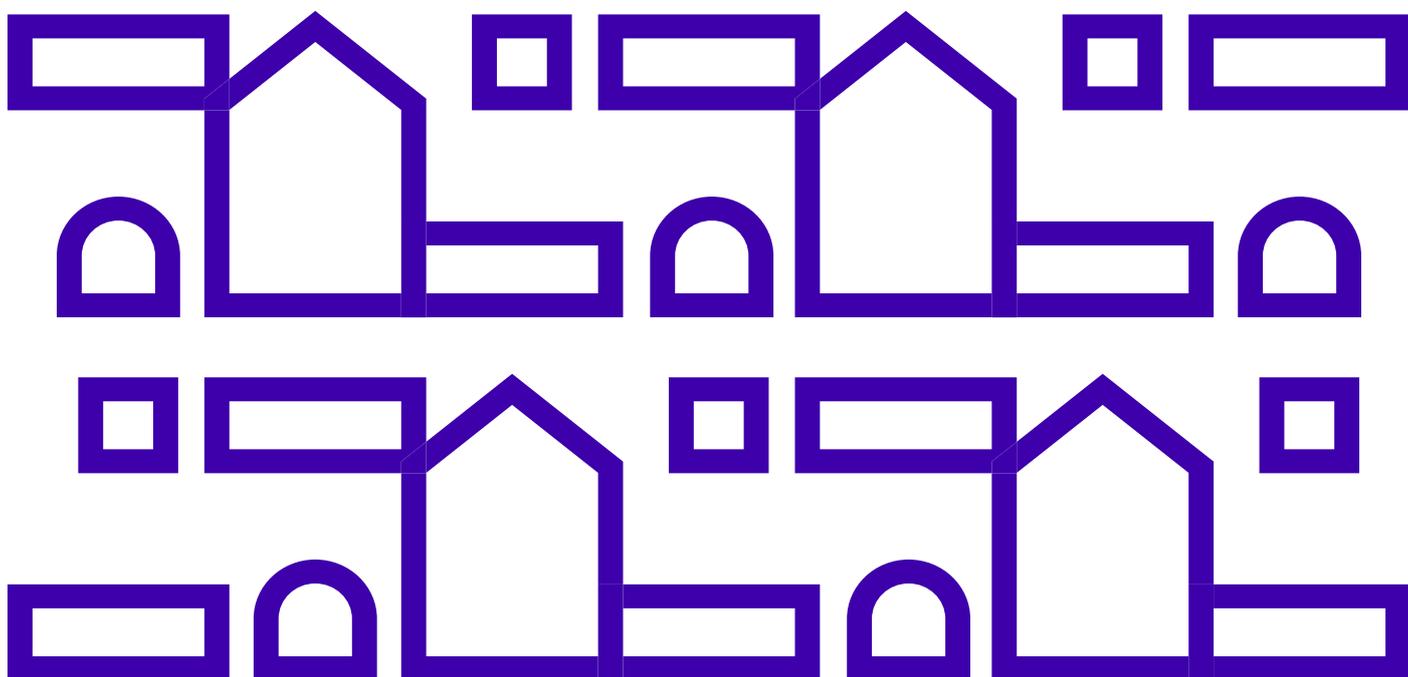
Audience: who is this policy information for?

The target of this policy brief is EU-wide, state level, and municipal level policy makers as well as civil society organisations and social care workers. The policy information refers, in particular, to forced migrants – such as those displaced by conflict, those claiming asylum, and refugees – and to the context of "crisis" or emergency associated with the summer of 2015 and with the start of the Ukraine war in February 2022.

Issues addressed

Based on work in, and exchange between, five European cities between August 2021 and November 2022, HOUSE-IN consortium identified the following key challenges, examples of local responses, and collated policy information around the question of what institutional learnings we can take from this project. Accordingly, what follows is divided into three sections: the first focuses on these key challenges, while the second lists examples of practices from our case cities that respond to them. The third section then outlines promising practices and institutional learnings, gained from these examples, which can broadly address the discrimination experienced in housing forced migrants.

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Key challenges

Key challenges span different dimensions
and scales: individual, societal, institutional,
and structural levels. Discriminatory practices
occur across, within, and between these levels
and have many faces. Tackling discrimination
in housing requires an approach that is both
holistic and reflexive.

1 | Selective solidarity

HOUSE-IN research from all five case studies
encountered the issue of discrimination against
forced migrants in relation to housing in the
form of selective solidarity across case-study
cities. The Ukraine conflict has exposed explic-
itly differential treatment of refugees based on
skin colour and country of origin.

🏠 **Case examples:**

*Increased migration from the Global
South in the summer of 2015 triggered
policy responses that were highly re-
strictive, aimed at the externalisation of
asylum procedure, the closure of borders,
and the criminalisation of migration. With
respect to the current increase associated
with the Ukraine conflict, the EU Commis-
sion has enabled an open-border policy,
removing the need for visa or residence
permits, and issuing funding – although
within a limited timeframe – for housing
and subsistence through the EU Tempo-
rary Protection directive.*

*HOUSE-IN has found that many of the
people willing to rent out a flat or tem-
porarily share their private space will do
so only for white Ukrainians, for example
in Leipzig, Vienna,[4] and Riga. Refugees
fleeing Ukraine can access housing in Eu-
rope via expedited routes, while long-term
asylum seekers remain on waiting lists.*

2 | Normalisation of discriminatory practices

There is widespread societal acceptance of,
or inaction around, certain forms of discrimi-
nation and a lack of consequence for acts of
discrimination. This means that discriminatory
practices are so deeply embedded into cultural
practices that they are "normalised", "invis-
ibilised", or tolerated, particularly under the
influence of nationalist and/or far-right groups
and political parties.

🏠 **Case examples:**

*Across cases, there is a lack of public
advocates for housing rights of migrants
in political parties etc. Discriminatory
housing practices often go unchallenged
in mainstream public discourse.*

*In Riga, the rhetoric of decolonialism (with
reference to Russia's influence) is used to
support nationalist exclusionary practices
at the borders and in housing.*

*In Leipzig, discrimination is discursively
constructed, for instance landowners jus-
tify lack of diversity and equality by saying
that "the other house owners would not
like it" or "they would not treat people
well."*

*In Vienna, the rise of the right wing party
into the national government from 2017–
2019, noticeably increased discriminatory
practices.[5]*

3 | A high level of discrimination against migrants by housing owners and housing companies

Many housing owners – including municipal housing companies or different kinds of housing companies, such as cooperatives – are involved directly and indirectly in discrimination against forced migrants. This discrimination takes place at different levels and at different points during the process of accessing housing (for example within eligibility criteria, contract terms, affordability, conditions for tenants, discrimination during a tenancy, etc.). Discrimination also takes various forms, such as rejection of housing applications, discriminating attitudes, and rules.

🏠 Case examples:

The cross-country exchange suggests that in Leipzig, migrants are often subject to informal vetting based on their names or their accents, and are often refused rental contracts in favour of those with "native" sounding names.

Landlords in Riga are unwilling to rent to the homeless or refugees, even when fully funded through the Housing First scheme.

In Austria (Styria), the antidiscrimination office commissioned a study to understand where the myths feeding discrimination in the housing sector originate from.[6]

Across the EU, laws around migrant categorisation and the criminalisation of facilitation of stay, position landlords as gatekeepers in migrant-filtering processes and define tenure available to newcomers. Punishments for facilitating the stay of unregistered migrants have incentivised landlords to discriminate. This inclusion of private housing providers as agents of "integration" and of exclusion, rather than as neutral arbiters, is seen to have placed housing at the centre of the entanglement of "race", housing, and cohesion/integration.

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4 | Housing markets enable and reproduce discrimination

(In)balances of private to social housing, and eligibility criteria for rental or social housing or financial support, disproportionately discriminate against forced migrants, leaving few access options thereby increasing housing precarity among this group. Minimal regulations on rents,[7] contract terms, and access facilitate discriminatory practices.

🏠 **Case examples:**

Social housing is not accessible to newcomers in the first years after their arrival (Vienna), and a shortage of social housing (Leipzig) and/or restrictions on housing-benefit access (Riga) disproportionately affect newcomers and favour nationals and longer-term residents.

High levels of housing ownership versus low levels of renting (e.g. in Riga) means that affordable housing stock is limited, and migrants compete in a tight rental market.

The private housing market is mostly unregulated in terms of contracts, prices, etc. In Vienna, temporary rental contracts have become the overall standard for the private rental sector. This is especially challenging for vulnerable people like forced migrants, who often find themselves in situations where they are forced to pay higher prices or are offered housing options in neighbourhoods unconducive to settling (e.g. dangerous neighbourhoods in Riga).

There is a general lack of sanctions for discriminatory practices (i.e. those practices by housing companies, landowners, etc.), and it is difficult to prove discrimination in order to be able to take legal action.

Undefined "social mix" aspirations and requirements (e.g. in Leipzig) are used to avoid renting to refugees and newcomers. This can increase residential segregation.

An intersectional perspective is necessary for forced migrants to appropriately consider their specific additional barriers for accessing the housing market, such as the lack of language skills, knowledge, often temporary residence, etc. Not considering this means indirect discrimination.

5 | Discrimination through disregard or normalisation of specific barriers for forced migrants

An implicit form of discrimination arises from the disregard, acceptance, or normalisation of the disadvantages and vulnerability experienced by forced migrants. Vulnerability thresholds, as prerequisites for eligibility and access to certain supports and services, can work to normalise degrees of disadvantage.

🏠 **Case example:**

In all HOUSE-IN cases, we learnt how fundamental language and local-market knowledge are for getting access to the housing market. Newcomers are often released from temporary accommodation into independent living without, or with limited, support that acknowledges intersectional challenges in these areas. This can produce significant barriers to obtaining adequate housing. Where these knowledge gaps exist, corresponding support gaps and disadvantages could be described as a form of indirect discrimination.

Examples of responses

These examples span the key challenges outlined above.

1 | Support of affected persons and acknowledgement of discriminating experience

The anti-discrimination office in Leipzig is offering (legal) counselling and advice for those affected by discrimination. They cannot take legal action themselves, but they offer important support and acknowledgement of discrimination.

2 | Collaborative housing as a social integration strategy

Collaborative housing is a type of housing in which residents rent complete apartment units and share extra kitchens, dining areas, and other spaces where residents can meet. SällBo (Helsingborg, Sweden) shows that older adults (over 70 years old), young refugees, and young Swedes (18 to 25 years old) can come closer when they have access to common spaces, allowing opportunities to meet and to get to know each other. Hence, when the purpose of collaborative housing is to enable access to affordable housing and social integration, this housing form contributes to settling down and enables migrants to meet locals on an everyday basis. The latter enables the integration process to extend beyond access to apartment units into social integration in everyday life that contributes to fostering a sense of belonging.
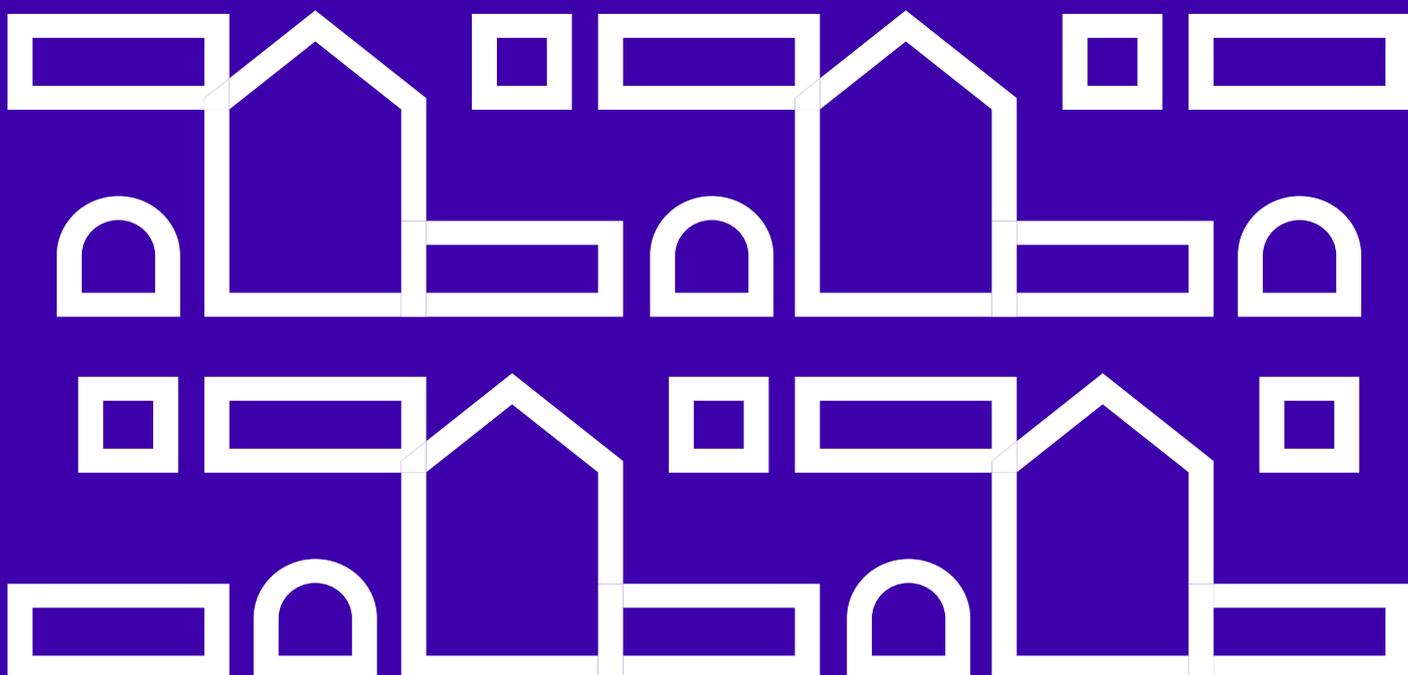
3 | Bridges

In Lund, civil society organisations create awareness and bridges between different societal actors, and engage in awareness building among civil society organisations, practitioners, and housing-market actors. An example might include hiring employees with migrant background that can support new migrants. It can also involve holding activities close to the housing, where information about society is given as well as community building. Together, the municipality and civil society organisations have identified gaps in the integration process and developed activities to fill these.

4 | Housing access and local knowledge support

Peers or support workers, including interpreters where necessary, accompany house seekers to appointments and accommodation visits. In doing so, they are able to mitigate potential discrimination and to provide local knowledge. MakeRoom Latvia is organising housing buddies who support housing seekers on a voluntary and individual basis (and, as such, this is not a solution for the structural problem of discrimination). Kontaktstelle Wohnen in Leipzig is a publicly funded stakeholder whose staff focuses explicitly on housing and on empowering flat seekers to better navigate the housing market and, in the future, be able to deal with formal issues and the renting process independently.

5 | Targeted housing supply

Housing support associations (Leipzig, Kontaktstelle Wohnen) try to make special agreements with housing companies to supply a number of flats (e.g. each month) that can be rented to their clients, for example asylum seeking persons.

6 | Support in the case of discrimination, counselling, and mediation services

Wohnpartner (Vienna), offers mediation in neighbourhood conflicts that address roots of conflict and can cut through discriminatory language and/or biases. The anti-discrimination office in Leipzig is offering (legal) counselling and advice for those affected by discrimination. They cannot take legal action themselves, but they offer important support and acknowledgement of discrimination.

7 | Anti-discrimination rules and regulations

Refugees renting apartments from the housing department of Lund (e.g. Project Ängsladan in Dalby) sign housing rules as a part of their rental agreement. The housing rules include that it is not permitted to discriminate. Repeated discriminatory practices can lead to losing the right to the apartment, in the worst case. Social workers supporting the newcomers discuss the common discrimination topics with the newcomers and sensitise them with the local rules and expectations in this regard prior to signing the contract.

8 | Provide structured findings and proof of discrimination

In Styria, (Austria) the anti-discrimination office commissioned a study to understand the discriminatory practices in the housing sector. The collected information and data can help to design appropriate responses. The anti-discrimination office in Leipzig also conducted tests to prove discrimination in the city and developeda survey of migrant residents which was able to provide information on migrants' experiences of discrimination.

9 | Develop accommodation programmes that foster intersectional encounter

Refugees Welcome Austria (Flüchtlinge Willkommen Österreich/FlüWi)[8] matches refugees' housing needs with private accommodation that is in shared flats or with families. This stimulates contact between refugees and the Austrian population, reduces prejudices, builds social networks, and promotes learning of the German language.

Promising practices and institutional learnings

Although discrimination is hard to pin down, HOUSE-IN case cities and responses to the Ukraine conflict demonstrate that discrimination against migrant newcomers in housing is addressed primarily by NGOs and civil society organisations. The following is a reflection on the challenges raised and identified by HOUSE-IN, and to extract and clarify the institutional learning gained from the project on the structural, EU, regional, and local levels. It is aimed at reducing discrimination (including against newcomers and refugees but not only) in national and municipal housing strategies.

1 | Anti-discrimination mainstreaming

Anti-discrimination awareness building and mainstreaming can be built into all organisations and institutions that deal with migrant housing needs. Examples from Lund show that creating bridges between different societal actors and engaging in awareness building among civil society organisations, practitioners, and housing-market actors can address discriminatory practices. This process can be enhanced by mainstreaming anti-discrimination within institutions through the following ways:

- **Knowledge generation and training**
  There is a need to better understand the intersectionality of discrimination and access to housing in order to think of more adequate support practices and policies. There is also a need for training actors within the housing market to better understand the facets and consequences of discrimination and to learn ways to handle this issue in a more conscientious and attentive manner

  Talking about "racial" discrimination increases people's understanding of what discrimination is (that would require talking about whiteness, privilege, etc).

  "Visibilising" discrimination and racism and recognising discriminatory practices can expose unconscious or even accepted behaviours, reframe perspectives, and promote and popularise equality in everyday practice.

  Institutional knowledge-building and training can challenge migration discourses and how migrants and migration are framed in public discourses.

  Surveying the opinion of migrants, as is being done in Leipzig[9] for example, may help to reach a larger audience and to gain deeper insights and knowledge into specific needs and problems, including discrimination.

- **Public discourse change**
  Establishing a positive discourse on the benefits of inclusive practices. Anti-discrimination mainstreaming in relation to settling down can challenge selective solidarity, double standards, and hidden practices (who gets housing and who doesn't) by impacting public discourse and supporting concepts of urban equality and housing as a human right.

- **Anti-discrimination offices**
  The establishment of anti-discrimination offices (as described for Leipzig above) that can coordinate with other organisations and institutions to provide training, support claims, etc. The offices can establish and facilitate clear paths and procedures for discrimination complaints.

- **Understanding the myth**
  The constellation of actors in each case-study city is different, and the discriminatory practices are fed by very different sources. Understanding the sources of fear and discriminatory practices is important to design proper housing strategies that can support the fundamental human right to housing. This has to be analysed and addressed at the local context.

2 | Strengthen policies on urban equality and diversity in the housing sector

Establish a housing policy that specifically targets equality and thereby reduces discrimination and racism. Leipzig has developed round tables with various stakeholders focused on (affordable) housing.

- **Provide training** on equality and diversity to staff working in the housing sector (either public and private) at all institutional levels.

- **Strengthen sanctions** on discriminatory practices (e.g. for housing suppliers) and support and/or reward for fair practices.

- **Prevent segregation** and ghettoisation of certain areas as well as the isolation of migrants.

- **Municipal round tables on discrimination** in housing can bring together necessary private, NGO, and municipal stakeholders, including anti-discrimination offices, and can focus on housing discrimination.

- **Mainstreaming urban equality** can frame housing as a human right accessible for everyone. A city-level, urban-equality focus for housing policy can navigate the harmful "othering" of migrants, produced by migrant-management logics formed on borders and within political and public discourses and capital structures. This can facilitate a decoupling of housing from harmful "integration" and migration governance policies and practices.

3 | Migrant newcomer support

Migrant newcomers are offered support through the housing process in order to prevent and challenge discrimination as it arises and to enable settling down. This process should be supported by national and municipal housing strategies, either directly or through NGOs. In Leipzig, the city encourages and finances organisations that support migrant housing needs. These organisations might provide peers or support workers, including interpreters where necessary, who accompany house seekers to appointments and accommodation visits. Counselling and mediation services in neighbourhood conflicts, offered by Wohnpartner (Vienna), address roots of conflicts and can cut through discriminatory language and biases.

- **Counselling**
  Offering counselling services on the topics of their rights to housing to forced migrants who are in the process of gaining housing, will support knowledge and recognition of (un)fair treatment. Counselling will also inform them on what steps to take in the event of unfair treatment. Counselling services might be offered by the municipality, NGOs, and housing companies.

- **Empowering**
  Offering language courses will help those in search of housing to take up different opportunities in searching for accommodation and communicating needs, raising their chances of gaining housing.

- **Advocating**
  Establishing anti-discrimination offices, with professionals trained in relevant topics, will enable migrants to deal with situations where discrimination takes place. Municipal actors and housing corporations can also turn to these offices for training on addressing discrimination in housing. Anti-discrimination offices should be included as important stakeholders.

- **Enduring collaborative solutions**
Collaboration between national, municipal, and civic institutions and organisations has produced innovative means of addressing the housing needs of forced migrants and formulating solutions to address inequalities and discrimination. Strengthening mutually beneficial and cooperative relations between tenants, institutions, and levels of housing management would require more structural funding and the division of tasks in order to allow competences, experience, and trust relations to consolidate.

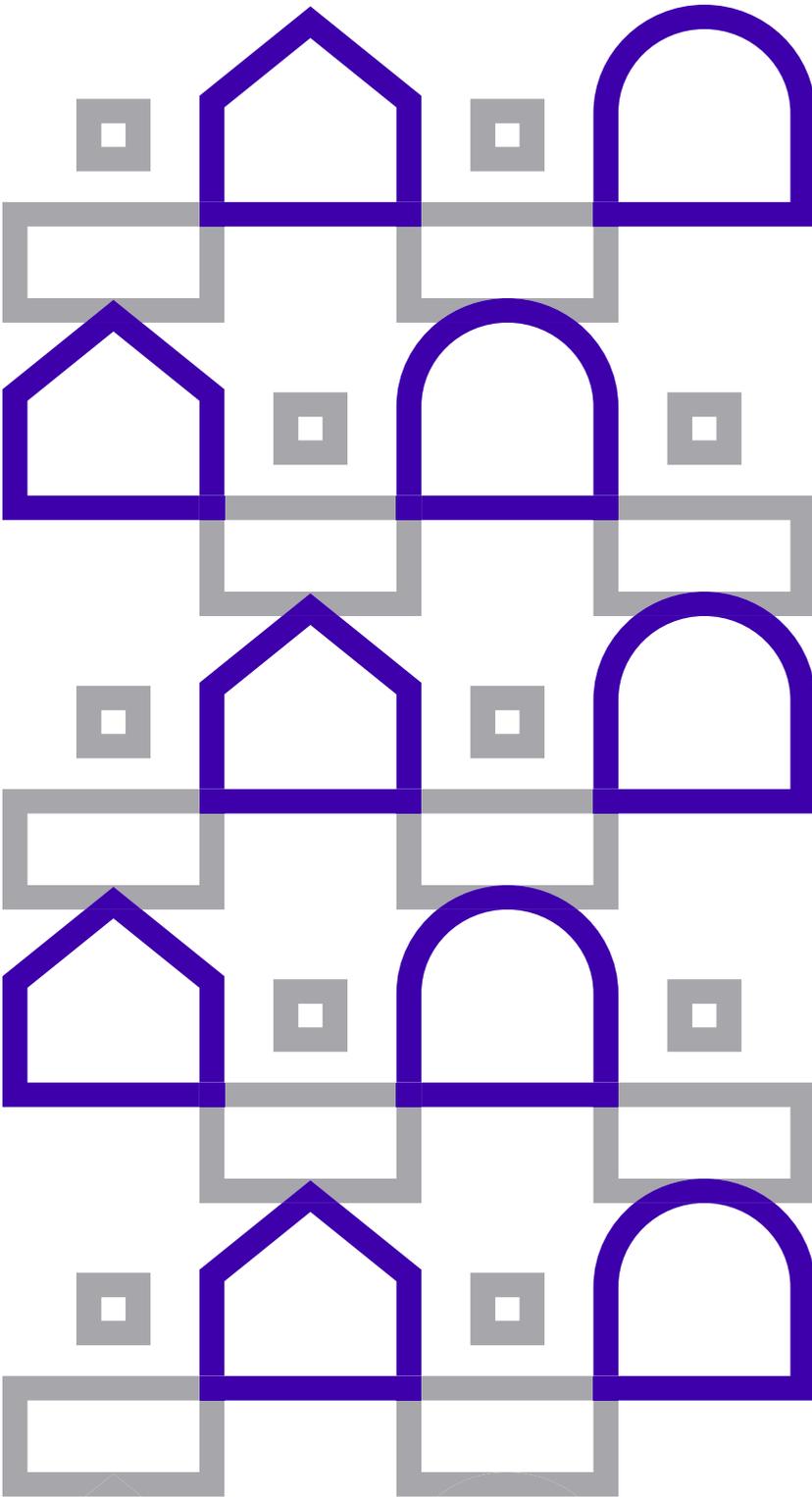## 4 | Facilitate living in community in a diverse society

Facilitating the living together of forced migrants and local residents may help to increase mutual understanding and daily communication, and provide spaces for encounter and interaction; it may actively contribute to the normalisation of diversity and counteract discrimination.

- The example of SällBo, a collaborative housing project with the purpose of enabling access to affordable housing and social integration, shows that, by mainstreaming equality, different groups of people can come closer and live in community. The process of settling down extends beyond access to individual apartment units and into social interaction and sharing practices in everyday life, fostering a sense of belonging.

- Also the example from Riga, where an association (NGO) will purchase a building and be the renter to newcomers, especially in emergency cases.

5 | Inspiring ideas for new practices

"Getting it right" is a handbook developed in Ireland which can help to identify malpractices in public services in terms of human rights.[10] Basing public services on human rights can help many communities and municipalities to have a common agenda. In Leipzig, the idea of a "certification" of discrimination-free housing companies has been discussed in order to set an incentive to avoid discrimination, rather than imposing penalties.

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What is this policy information about?

This policy information presents a collection of challenges in the field of housing integration of forced migrants and responses to these challenges that were identified during a cross-country exchange among different scientific and practice partners in various European cities. Based on a series of international and local transdisciplinary exchanges, a set of promising practices (in place) and ideas (for the future) was identified that is presented here to fuel knowledge and discussion on the organisation of appropriate housing integration for forced migrants. The information provided here seeks to be useful for both scientific and practitioner audiences and to fuel the scholarly debate and local decision-making practices.