

HOUSE-IN Policy Information #2

Enabling settling down and belonging
Creating structures that facilitate forced migrants in
becoming part of the urban society



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 integration possibilities with the housing offers for forced migrants. The information gathered here seeks to be useful for both scientific and practitioner audiences, and to fuel both the scholarly debate and local decision-making practices.

Knowledge elicitation: process and components

NOTE 01

Project duration:
June 2021–
November 2022.

This policy brief is based on research and exchanges within the project HOUSE-IN, a JPI Urban Europe-funded research project¹ that focused on the challenges of the housing-integration nexus at the local level 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).

For whom is this policy information?

The challenges described here and the case encountered examples that we learn from can support all kinds of decision makers, whether they are working for public bodies or are civic initiatives or housing corporations. This document is divided into three sections to make it easier to navigate: “challenges”, “responses”, and “promising practices or ideas”.



Why do we need to look at the integration potentials of housing?

Migrant newcomers, especially forced migrants, are new to the urban system and depend on housing offers that are accessible for them. Additional restrictions (e.g. low-income households, mobility, and local knowledge) predefine their housing options tremendously. As a result, the provision of affordable housing, proximity to social life, and possibilities of encountering locally rooted people have a pronounced impact on the integration process for newcomers. In the case of Vienna or Leipzig, social housing opportunities are provided by the municipality or by different kinds of housing companies but are accessible only to some forced migrants.

In Riga, the housing is provided by individual owners or corporations only. In Lund and Helsingborg, affordable housing is mostly provided by municipal housing companies (LKF and Helsingborgshem respectively). Housing areas in each city display different opportunities and obstacles for newcomers. There is great potential for them to learn from each other's practice to enhance the integration capacity of different forms of housing. In this document, we identify the common challenges of five case-study cities and then address them with examples and recommendations.

Key challenges

Becoming part of the local society takes time. Certain opportunities and conditions can speed up the process, and others may challenge the process even further. People's living circumstances and the neighbourhood in general can significantly affect the kind and quality of social contacts. The five HOUSE-IN case-study cities, like many others in Europe, find it challenging to fully capitalise on the potential for integration in housing. The key difficulties portrayed here are seen in most of our study cities, regardless of whether they are shrinking or growing, or if they have affordable housing offers or only a private housing market with no regulations.

01 | Temporary solutions

When cities experience a surge of migration, different stakeholders try to find quick housing solutions, which are generally thought of as temporary and from which migrants are expected to move on. But forced migrants may endure this situation for long periods of time for various reasons. This can make migrants feel uncomfortable, as they are expecting to move (migrate) again and/or are waiting for more permanent housing solutions so they can settle down.

🏠 Case example:

HOUSE-IN members visited an asylum centre in Riga and temporary modular housing in Lund, and collected experiences from the private hosting of Ukrainian refugees in the five cities. These temporary solutions definitely help under extreme situations like war, but can cause additional challenges. Mass (temporary) accommodation for forced migrants, especially in peripheral locations, minimises communication and encounters with locals. Private hosting for longer periods of time can also exhaust the welcoming capacities of hosts. In all situations, temporary solutions should last the shortest time period possible to avoid the development of additional integration challenges.

2 | Lack of empathy of mediating staff

Tenants of varying backgrounds and limited shared culture can be led astray by biases, misunderstandings, and false presumptions. Property owners often lack capacities to mediate between tenants in such instances (i.e. in social conflicts). External actors, such as qualified facilitators, can form a link between them (e.g. with other migrants explaining local customs and unwritten rules).

🏠 Case example:

Unresolved conflicts and powerful subcultures have been shown to lead to segregation and stigmatised neighbourhoods in the cities researched in HOUSE-IN. In Leipzig, this has been seen in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, where there is rivalry over limited resources among precarious groups. Hostility towards forced migrants is due to the insecurity of residents. In Lund, when providing a reason why refugee housing is so isolated, accommodation providers stated that locals (Swedes) are not "ready" or "prepared" to welcome a large influx of refugees. In Vienna's social housing, conflicts between neighbours can be attributed to cultural discrepancies. Moreover, some tenant councils can be prejudiced, leading to tenants with a migration origin often feeling neglected.

3 | Lack of spaces for participation

Various methods exist to facilitate participation and encourage community activities that allow people to become acquainted and build a community. However, transforming creative ideas into actions requires consistency and devotion. Complicated organisational systems, a dearth of non-profit facilities, insufficient staff, or scarce budgets can limit grassroots efforts. The isolated or distanced location for refugee housing (as mentioned above) makes participation even more challenging.

🏠 Case examples:

In all cities examined by HOUSE-IN, there are numerous housing facilities for displaced persons, which are primarily seen as an offer to provide shelter. However, these accommodations often do not provide (quality) common areas and services, which would help to foster relationships. As a result, people are often unfamiliar with one another. This may lead to feelings of loneliness or even conflicts and residential segregation.

4 | Bad shape of housing

The cities we have researched have complex housing histories and consequently have housing that requires repairs and revamping. Such houses are not preferred by local tenants and are left for cases of emergency or times of crisis.

🏠 Case examples:

In Riga, many privately owned properties are in need of investment. Some of them are rented in poor condition to forced migrants or newly arrived students. Vienna has a long history of social housing, but numerous buildings require refurbishment. However, some renters are vocal in opposing such investments because they are concerned that prices will rise. Consequently, the renovation process is taking much longer, and there is still a housing stock with low standards, which are then used for urgent necessities.

5 | Difficulty in scaling up single cases

NOTE 02

Vinzirast-mittendrin is a volunteer-based organisation that brings refugees and formerly homeless people, as well as students in shared flats together.

NOTE 03

OASE.inklusive provides affordable housing to newcomers who would normally be unable to afford and gain access to in a co-housing project.

In the HOUSE-IN case cities, individuals demonstrated how ambition can help to surpass deficits. Unique cases of housing solutions have been developed into successful practices of integration. Despite offering models and examples of solutions, scaling them up to other context and transferability potential prove to be challenging. Their success is due to the ambition of the individual within a local context.

Case examples:

In housing examples like Vinzirast² and Oasis,³ in which refugees live together with selected local residents, the exchange and support among the tenants have a boost. But such examples are not easily replicable, since they cater to the needs of very specific groups and are made possible through the creativity and extra effort of the people in charge. Also, the housing project SällBo in Helsingborg (Sweden), where young refugees live together with elderly local people, represents a promising experiment of collaborative housing, but it could be realised only due to a combination of matching factors and conditions. A lot can be learned from these projects that can be applied in other contexts, but as a whole, they are not easily to be scaled up or transferred. In this regard, the examples remain niche solutions only.

6 | Implementation of good quality policies

Policies can come from different sources and are often formulated as abstract rules which will have absolute character in implementation. In fact, many well-intended policies can also lead to difficulties and obstacles in practice and implementation.

Case examples:

For instance, the language-learning precondition often leads to discrimination and a delay of the integration process. Although language knowledge is indispensable for settling and belonging in a long-term understanding, making it a precondition for many initial steps of settling, such as finding good housing or a first job, may result in additional obstacles for newcomers and increase their precariousness and exclusion instead of being a helpful request to ease settling. This example illustrates that such policies need to be evaluated in an ongoing manner and also need to be responsive to the local conditions and needs.

7 | Silo thinking by different institutions

Migration, and especially forced migration, does not happen in a linear manner, and obtaining the right to stay, to work, and to receive education or healthcare are interconnected but are only achieved through lengthy bureaucratic processes. These can influence eligibility for housing. Additionally, responsibility for housing and integration services are spread across different institutions and civic society organisations, separated from each other in terms of budgets. When national bodies do not allow (or process) the necessary permissions, access, and funding for forced migrants, local administrations cannot proceed with serving the needs of the newcomers, which was the case in Latvia, Austria, Germany, and Sweden.

🏠 Case examples:

For Leipzig, we have ambivalent evidence: on the one hand, the “arrival centres” that were established for Ukrainian war refugees in 2022 show how administration can go beyond silo thinking and provide efficient arrival and support structures. On the other hand, the change of responsibility for Ukrainian refugees that occurred in June 2022 – from the social department to the job centre – caused a lot of problems and again showed silo thinking.

In Riga, the Ministry of Welfare is charged with the overall guidance of the integration strategy for refugees. However, housing falls within the purview of the Ministry of Economy. Furthermore, municipalities need to coordinate with both – the Ministry of Welfare as well as the Ministry of Regional Development, which covers municipal funding. This is further complicated by the involvement of the Ministry of Culture, which has to support the learning of language and culture and also manages the Society Integration Foundation, under which the mentorship programme works.

8 | Inaccessible structures

There are no or few local structures to encourage participation or co-creation processes with forced migrants. Also, the democratic process does not involve their opinions (e.g. through elections), and, therefore, the political influence on policies does not often reflect the needs and wishes of newcomers. Other processes – for example participatory processes, tenants advocates, etc. – occur mainly in the local language, which excludes many migrant tenants due to linguistic barriers.

🏠 Case examples:

In Vienna, it was only in 2006 [🔗] that eligibility criteria for municipal housing opened up to include non-Europeans. In Riga, with Latvian and Russian being the dominant languages in use, newcomers with no local language knowledge – or knowing only English, for example – have difficulty communicating their needs. In Leipzig, a migrant council has been established, which can be seen as an advocate for refugees’ interests, since some of its members deal with refugees’ employment concerns.

9 | Lack of advocacy

Newcomers are not only excluded from political representation, but are also often lacking in terms of rights and obligations developed through common knowledge and culture. This increases the vulnerability of forced migrant newcomers.

🏠 Case examples:

Generally, it is complicated for forced migrant newcomers to defend their demands and rights openly and self-confidently. Their assertion of rights might lead to additional problems, for example in the process of acknowledgement of asylum. Therefore, they often do not voice concerns of discrimination, bad housing conditions, etc. In Riga, forced migrant newcomers are mostly represented by local activists and, only recently, newcomer-led initiatives have sprung up.

The city of Leipzig has a migrants' council, which represents the interests of migrants in local political debates and participates in the decisions of the city council on issues that affect the interests of migrants. They can approach each of their representatives and tell them about their interests. A challenge for the migrant council is to reach out to the majority of migrants living in the city and make them aware of its work, since in the 2021 city council elections only 7% of migrants voted for their representatives.

Examples of responses

When our own four walls become home, we feel settled. Therefore, housing has the capacity to develop people's sense of belonging. This is a unique experience and process for people who had to flee their former homes (forced migrants). When the physical space provided becomes their new home, people experience a sense of stability and security. New relationships are created with neighbours and the neighbourhood. When the neighbourhood can also accommodate other aspects of life, such as work, education, and child or elderly care, then the newcomers can become part of the community, with regular interactions, exchanges, and eventually local cooperation. Housing is at the core of this individual social life and can contribute significantly to the feeling of

being settled and connected to the surroundings. The HOUSE-IN consortium found a wide spectrum of responses to the challenges identified through cross-country exchange. Each approach has a different impact and constellation of actors. This section introduces selected projects, organisations, and approaches which address the challenges in an effective manner. While these responses are embedded in local contexts and cannot be simply replicated, they can provide useful insights in other contexts.



1 | Settling down, community, belonging

In Lund's modular housing (temporary housing) or municipality-owned properties, newcomers live for a limited period of time and then move out into housing with permanent rental agreements. It is the individual's responsibility to arrange permanent housing, but the municipality aims to offer permanent housing to as many newcomers as possible. Indeed, when the municipality acquires housing, it aims for an agreement with the property owners that regulates the transfer of rental agreements and often bypasses the owner's standard policy. For instance, in the housing complex in Dalby, the newcomers were offered the possibility to transfer their temporary rental contracts to permanent ones on condition that occupants had paid the last 12 months on time, taken good care of the apartment, not caused disturbances, and not incurred debts with a landlord. Additional demands have been applied by property owners in different cases. Having the opportunity to turn a temporary rental contract into a permanent one is an essential element of settling down, creating long lasting relationships with the community, and increasing feelings of belonging and being a part of the community. These kind of ambitions and agreements, along with avoiding bottlenecks, is supportive, and as a citywide strategy, can create a good framework on which people can rely.

2 | Holistic approach to housing and integration

Integrationshaus,^② a non-profit organisation based in Vienna, began its operations in 1995 and has since been providing safe homes for migrants and refugees. Starting a new life after migrating or fleeing is handled holistically. Their approach to housing includes providing accommodation, care, education, and counselling for refugees and migrants under one roof. Their project and achievement is unparalleled and has become a model of excellence both nationally and internationally. The organisation also promotes integration and inclusion throughout the city, and aims to enhance understanding between different cultures.

3 | Multiple offers in the affordable housing market

Municipal housing ^② makes Vienna the largest provider of public housing in Europe: 40% of Viennese flats are either non-profit (social housing or limited-profit housing associations) or are part of the municipal housing stock of about 200,000 flats. Wiener Wohnen is owned by the city of Vienna and is responsible for managing the property and providing affordable housing to residents. For over a hundred years, the city followed the vision of ensuring that residents in the city, including vulnerable groups, are eligible and have access to affordable and safe housing. Even though 80% of the residents of the city fulfil the requirements for social housing, to access social housing, potential tenants must have lived at the same address in Vienna for two years.

Since the 1970s, the city of Vienna (mainly through the wohnfonds_wien^②) supports private or corporate house owners in the renovation of their houses – for example to achieve climate goals – on the condition that one third of the renovated or newly created houses are offered to residents eligible for social housing for a given amount of time. This creates new affordable housing capacities in the private sector. Additionally, multiple non-profit cooperatives and developers follow the city's strategy for affordable housing and offer subsidised apartments with regulated rents. Also, new constructions and their architecture competitions are evaluated as well as subsidised with the aim of creating affordable housing for people in need.

4 | Skilled support for migrants covering all fields of life

The Welcome Centre Leipzig provides support and advice to people with a migration background who have moved to or are living in Leipzig. The multilingual team offers initial and referral counselling related to all aspects of social life, like housing, work, childcare, and leisure. Visitors receive a list of housing cooperatives, real estate management companies, internet portals, and shared flats. Regular and free information events deal with, among other things, the topics of finding a flat and the aspects of renting, as well as about the making of a rental agreement and operating costs (incidental costs). The Welcome Centre is a project of city's department for migration and integration. This department acts as an interface between the city of Leipzig and actors involved in migration and integration. They are part of expert panels and municipal working groups, and they compile, evaluate, and enhance the municipal concept of integration. This type of organisation of stakeholders and information flow can support the further improvement of municipal concepts and services.

5 | Matching tenants to overcome loneliness

In (mass) housing districts and areas, feelings of social isolation, loneliness, and disconnection may arise. Anonymity in our modern society challenges people of different age groups and origins. In European collaborative housing projects, the space constellation and social programming aims to create moments and occasions of exchange and connection. For instance, Vinzirast mittendr in Vienna, a volunteer-based organisation in Vienna, Austria, was established in 2013 to provide homes for refugees, homeless people, and students, and dedicated rooms for collaborative use by the tenants. By mixing people from different backgrounds in one apartment building, it encourages social dialogue and connects the different resident groups. Similarly, Oase inklusiv, a subsidised community housing project in Vienna, provides homes with collaboratively elaborated social space-functions. In this project, a tenants' community that wanted to live in a diverse community joined up with a limited-profit developer and the NGO Neunerhaus, who provided flats for migrants. The house was developed jointly by the participating groups as a subsidised house. As such, it also hosts tenants eligible for social housing schemes in Vienna, which are then administered by the Wiener Wohnen team. These examples demonstrate how public bodies and private organisations can work together to promote social cohesion in the field of housing.

6 | Collaborative Housing SällBo: enabling af fordability and social integration

SällBo (Companion Housing) is an innovative housing strategy that combines two types of housing: the first, secure apartments for older adults over 70 years old; the second, municipal rental housing for young people (migrants and locals between 18 to 25 years old).²

The project was initiated by Helsingborgshem with the purpose of tackling local societal challenges such as loneliness of older adults and young people, as well as offering affordable housing for these groups in Helsingborg. Hence, SällBo is an example of collaborative housing. It was initiated by a municipal housing company after renovating a former eldercare facility. Here older adults, young refugees, and young Swedes can afford to rent apartment units (36 and 49 m²) and share several common spaces (580 m²) distributed throughout the building, enabling social integration through socialisation in everyday life. The common areas of the building are collectively used, programmed, and maintained, and have predefined social procedures and socialising times, allowing the tenants to get to know each other very well and work together on different topics. This project, with its tenants groups and its facilities in the building, strengthens the settling of newcomers and overcomes potential segregation from other societal groups, which is very often experienced by forced migrants. Collaboration within daily and collective activities, sharing common spaces, and establishing direct local networks is a precious framework in the integration process for forced migrants.

7 | Policy and regulation for subsidised housing

To guarantee the quality and social benefits of the subsidised housing in Vienna, a four-pillar model² is employed. The model assesses the quality of subsidised housing in the fields of architectural design, ecology, economy, and social sustainability. All subsidised housing projects must meet the criteria of these four pillars, which is evaluated either by the advisory board or through a public property development competition. While the standards in the first three competence areas (architecture, ecology, and economy) are high in international comparison, projects often score the relevant points for a land plot when they employ social programming. This process ensures that subsidised housing is affordable and secure, provides a contemporary housing solution, and is available for vulnerable groups. This model is especially used for some plots in new development areas. However, not all building rights are treated equally – for example non-subsidised housing projects catering to the private market can still be built without the same regulations.

8 | Mediation among tenants

NOTE 04

The cities offer plenty of places to consume (and pay), e.g. in restaurants or cafes where people meet and exchange, but for neighbourhood activities and also for social groups with less financial means, these meeting places can have an exclusionary character. Therefore, informal meeting places, which do not expect the users to consume (and pay) are very important for social interactions and social coherence. Such non-consume-places can often be found in parks. Indoor places for neighbourhoods, which do not require consuming, can include a wider range of neighbours.

Since 2010, Wohnpartner² has been providing social support to municipal housing in Vienna (Wiener Wohnen). With over 150 multilingual and multi-ethnic employees, they work with the tenants of the Wiener Wohnen houses. Their activities include hosting social events for neighbours to get to know each other, such as gardening events, and organising projects for children and youth, such as dancing events. In cases of conflict, Wohnpartner mediates between the different sides to find solutions by enhancing the communication and agency of the tenants. They also encourage tenants to participate in decision-making processes regarding their living environments by establishing tenants' councils. In Leipzig, the municipal housing company runs a social service for tenants to resolve problems and negotiate conflicts. The municipality also finances counselling services for migrants' housing concerns that are assigned to local NGOs in Leipzig's neighbourhoods; International Women and Contact Point Housing, who were partners in HOUSE-IN, are among these NGOs. Not least, there are initiatives by NGOs, like International Women, to bring different groups of residents (with and without migrant backgrounds) to a table through organising neighbourhood meetings or festivals, for example.

9 | Institutional collaboration

While the main goal of Wiener Wohnen in Vienna is to facilitate access to affordable and safe housing, their outreach extends beyond. They collaborate with social initiatives, other departments of the municipality. They have a hotline for tenants; they work with Wohnpartner on neighbourhood conflicts; they installed different community spaces, the so called "Grätzlzentrum", as a non-consume-place⁴ in their premises to act as a community space for their tenants; they are open for collaboration with NGOs; and they have emergency apartments available. They also work with other public and private institutions to address financial, environmental, and social issues that tenants are facing.

Promising practices

01 | Central and enhanced support for migrants

The Municipal Welcome Centre in Leipzig is an information hub, which acts as an intermediate player between local actors of integration and the corresponding division of the municipality. Next to providing efficient and enhanced support in one location regarding different spheres of life, this constellation can lead to improvements and advancements within the municipal divisions.

2 | Socialising for community building

Organising social events in the neighbourhood can help migrants and locals interact and become acquainted. Recognising and understanding each other can assist in diminishing negative views, helping individuals to feel accepted, welcomed, and at home. Collective activities, which tie people to a community, can increase the feeling of belonging.



3 | Diversified activities

The immediate neighbourhood around the home is the accessible field for many newcomers. Community activities in the neighbourhood must provide a balanced and diverse selection to suit the needs of all residents. Next to suitability for different age groups and genders, organisers also need to consider the varying capabilities, cultures, and interests of newcomers. Young residents can easily be overlooked or feel left out. As a result, they do not participate in neighbourhood events or residents' councils. This is especially true for young people with a migration background. To ensure inclusion, a balanced and diverse activity programme should also target those who are less vocal in the community. Suitable activities on site can help to increase the feeling of belonging from a young age onwards.

4 | Continued counselling

Providing easily accessible counselling about a rental property is essential for informing renters about their housing rights and welfare. This counselling should be accessible to tenants of both public and private housing and should be adequately funded by local authorities. A service in dominant languages spoken in the community would be desirable.

5 | Establishing mediation capacities in the residential environment

Professional and impartial mediation and counselling should be available to everyone to clarify disputes. Typically, problems occur among tenants, as well as between owners and tenants. A power balance among actors can be achieved with different types of organisations (non-governmental organisations, private companies, or municipal organisations) best suited to the local needs. Ultimately, this will not just benefit housing but contribute to a more inclusive society at large.

6 | Measures against discrimination

Housing contracts should include sections that discuss what measures are taken if discrimination takes place. Having these measures incorporated into housing contracts will not only have a direct effect on how people interact with each other but also send a message of support to marginalised communities by showing that discrimination is simply not tolerated.



Promising ideas

7 | Mediating between different needs

Riga, with many private houses in need of maintenance, has a great potential for community or neighbourhood associations that could mediate between the needs of private homeowners and tenants in need of affordable housing. Such organisations could collaborate with NGOs as well as the municipality on integration challenges. To really be impactful, these institutions need to be given resources (funding, personnel, guidance, and consulting) to fulfil such tasks.

8 | Community empowerment instead of individual support

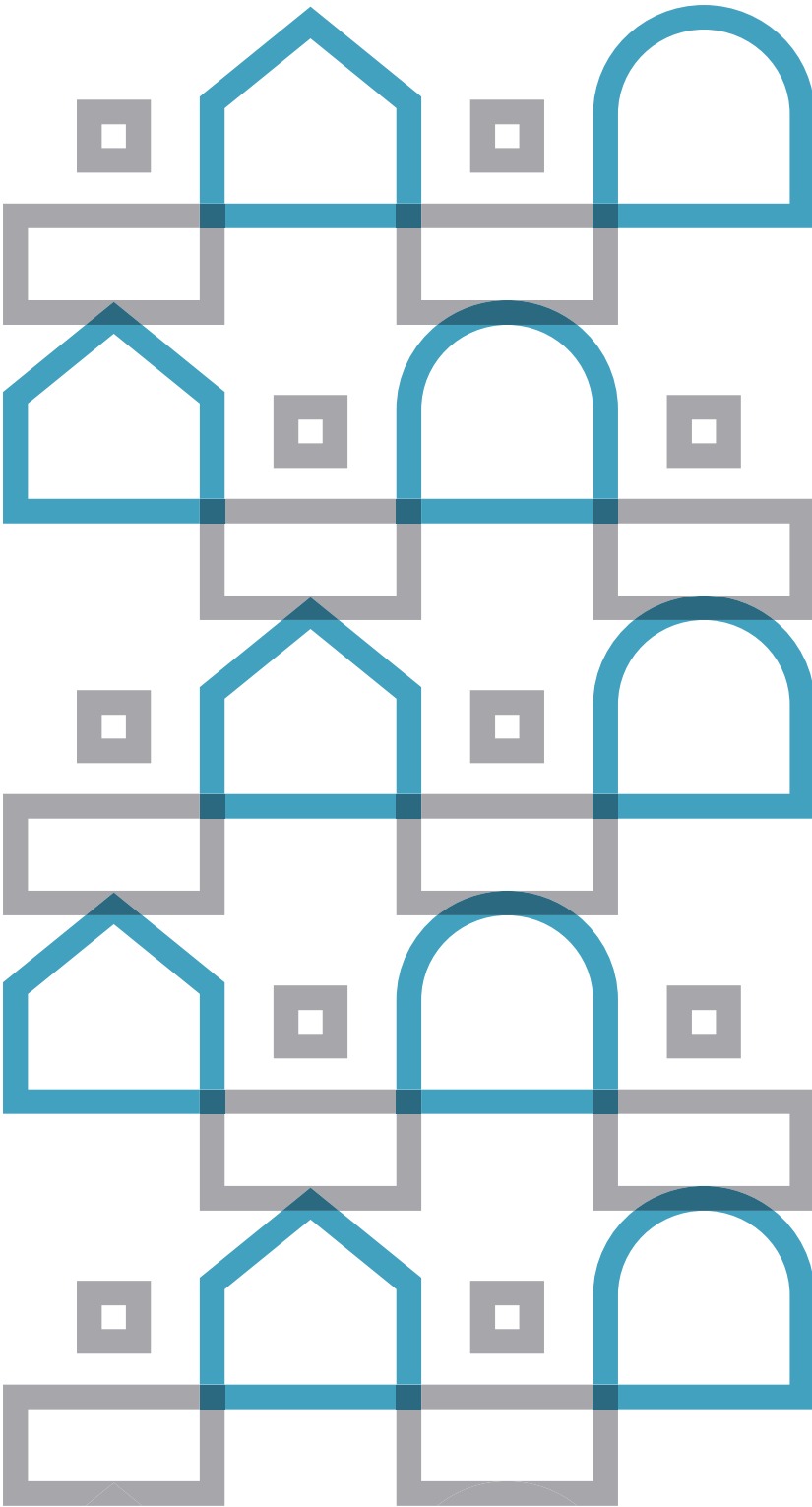
Highlighting, promoting, and mainstreaming the benefits of an inclusive society – for example less friction and reduction of spatial inequalities – can empower the community as a whole and strengthen the belonging of individuals. Such a society can also increase the willingness or desire for inclusion and integration on an individual basis. The topic is too important to be left solely to the affordable housing market or to some niche solutions. The housing market within all segments needs to contribute to inclusion and social coherence. New constructions and readapted buildings can have similar standards and/or fixed quotas, creating affordable housing that is open to everyone, especially to migrants.

9 | Feedback culture in implementation phase of policies

Policies are, in most cases, slow in reacting to particularities and are often based on experience learned from previous time periods. The recent refugee waves show that we need to utilise these learnings and experiences, and continuously improve policies, processes, and regulations.

10 | Enabling motivated people to strive

Most replication efforts want to replicate an example or scale it up. But most of the inspiring examples we saw in the HOUSE-IN project resulted from the combined efforts of individuals within different types of organisations. Therefore, there is a need to work at the structural level to enable motivated people to co-create initiatives that foster systemic change.



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