

11th Informal Meeting of EU Housing Ministers

Kuopio, 27-28 September 1999

Final communiqué

Housing for Older People

I

- 1) The 11th Informal Meeting of EU Housing Ministers, which convened in Kuopio from 27 to 28 September 1999 examined "Housing for Older People". There were also discussions on sustainable housing, building and urban development.
- 2) The ministers stated that, under the subsidiarity principle, the responsibility for the aims and practical means in housing policy rests with the individual Member States themselves. The ministers also stated that the subsidiarity approach to housing policies within the Union is still justified in spite of, for instance, increased economic integration. Nevertheless, according to Article 136 of the [Amsterdam Treaty](#), the Community and the Member States shall have as their objectives, for example, the promotion of improved living and working conditions, and the combating of exclusion. In addition, articles 137, 140, 158, 159 and 174 are also of relevance for housing policies.
- 3) The number and proportion of older people will increase substantially in all Member States, although there are differences between them. At this moment, there are some 60 million people of at least 65 years within the Union area, and this corresponds to some 15 percent of the total population. According to prognoses, by 2030 the number will lie around 90 million. By then, one in four people of the EU population will be at least 65 years of age. The increase will be seen particularly in the number of people over 80 years of age. In ten EU Member States, the number of people in this age bracket is forecast to increase by at least 85 percent in the period 1995-2030.
- 4) According to a survey made for the ministers' meeting by the Finnish Ministry of the Environment, the majority of older people in the EU Member States live in mainstream housing. In some Member States, seniors usually reside independently, while in other Member States most of them live with relatives. According to the responses, various intermediate forms between institutional care and living at home, can be found in every EU Member States. Altogether, living in institutions is quite unusual in the EU. The survey also brings out obvious differences between Member States, so that housing policy goals and measures do, and will continue to, display major differences in different Member States.

II

5) The Ministers stated that the expected increase in the older population poses serious challenges to a broad range of policy sectors, including housing policies. The Ministers underlined the general importance of sufficient liberty of choice for older people with regard to the accommodation and related support services they use, especially for those older persons who are the most vulnerable in terms of their health and financial capabilities. There is a particular need for appropriate policy measures to tackle social disadvantage and to ensure a good quality of living conditions, accommodation and services for all older persons, including those who are not able to live independently. In developing effective housing and care services now and in the future, the Ministers recognized the fundamental need to involve and consult with older people and their representatives about their expectations, views and requirements. The Ministers emphasized the importance of involving older people in developing strategies and solutions.

6) A dwelling adapted to the needs of an older person is a prerequisite for living at home as one ages. The Ministers stressed that the possibility of living at home is in accordance with older people's wishes, and this is also beneficial to the community and society as a whole. The housing problems of older people can only be solved by a broad range of housing and support services. The Ministers maintained that in the alleviation of the housing problems of older people, the main approach should be to support living at home for as long as possible, allowing also people to make a positive choice to move into more convenient or appropriate accommodation as they age. This being the case, more attention needs to be paid to ensure that homes are accessible, convenient and safe, and are capable of meeting the needs of residents with declining mobility.

7) Since Member States are well aware of the forthcoming increase in an ageing population, they can and should even now prepare for it. The Ministers stated that the housing needs of older people should be taken into account in new building of dwellings. Where possible, new dwellings should be designed to meet also the needs of older people, or at least to be easily adapted for such needs, thereby also contributing towards sustainable housing and building.

8) The bulk of the dwellings that older people will require are already in existence. The Ministers stressed that an even greater challenge than new building for older people is to adapt the existing housing stock to fit their needs. The lack of lifts and many other similar constraints are factors that increase the need for social and health services, as well as the need for service housing and institutional care. The Ministers stated that the use of funds to adapt existing residential houses and dwellings is generally very cost effective; that is, less is needed for expensive services, such as living in institutions and service housing. The Ministers also stressed the importance of developing technology to cater for the special needs of older people.

9) In most EU Member States, older people live in owner-occupied housing. This means that many older people possess capital in the ownership of

their homes. The Ministers were aware of the need to explore new ways of helping older people to safely utilize their capital to obtain the housing and support services they need, for example, to repair or adapt their existing homes or to release income to cover the costs of support services or to purchase new accommodation with support services available.

10) The increasing numbers of older people in general, and the higher life expectancy in particular, are the most important factors contributing to a substantial increase in the numbers of older persons who may no longer be able to live in dignity at home: one group is older persons suffering from dementia. The Ministers said that the importance of adequate living and housing conditions for older people suffering from dementia cannot be overemphasized.

11) In many Member States, the number of places in institutions (including those intended for the older people) has been cut. Although the preconditions for living at home are being improved, not all older people will, nevertheless, be able to live at home. As the oldest age groups increase, the number of people who cannot live in their homes without assistance will also increase. However, the Ministers recognized that an appropriate level of institutional care of older people should be maintained, and at the same time, the conditions pertaining to living in institutions should be improved. There are several alternatives to residential and nursing homes being explored within Member States. These include the development of extra care schemes combining independent living environments with intensive support services. The Ministers recognized the need to explore non-traditional housing and care responses, and to encourage diversity in provision.

12) Housing for older people is something far more than a question of housing policy, and therefore, it is important to ensure that solutions are part of integrated strategies, incorporating, as appropriate, housing, transport, health and other services. The Ministers emphasized that ensuring well-being of older people requires better co-operation between different agencies, including public, voluntary and private. This refers to housing policy, social and health care, and general social policy. Links also need to be made with government action to address older people's other needs, such as adequate income. The required services for older people are provided both as public and private services, and the voluntary and non-profit sector is an important complementary factor. The Ministers agreed on the need to stimulate the establishment of joint local and higher level agreements between housing authorities and associations, social services, medical and health services, transport agencies, police authorities and other facilities to cater, in partnership with older persons and their organizations, for the common and individual needs of older people.

13) The Ministers emphasized the vital contribution that older people make to balanced communities. It is essential that policies properly recognize them as an active and valuable resource for their neighbourhoods. To complement cultural and social diversity, a mix of different age groups is an important goal, and policies should confirm and increase the opportunities

for older people to continue to play their full role in society, and make this role highly valued by others. At the same time, housing for older people should be developed alongside general housing to help ensure the social inclusion of older people.

14) The Ministers underlined the efforts of the European Commission in paying particular attention to the ageing and disabilities within the Fifth Framework Programme of Research, Technological Development and Demonstration. The Ministers also welcomed the exchange of experiences, including best practices, in the field of housing in the EU Member States. In that context they noted with appreciation the work of HOPE (Housing for Older People in Europe - a European Network of Housing Associations) towards the development of a European database on housing practices for older people in Europe.

III

15) The Ministers had a useful discussion about sustainable housing, building and urban development and they confirmed these issues as a permanent item on the agenda of future meetings. They stressed a broader perspective on sustainability, including not only design, efficient use of building materials and energy, but also the social aspects of housing and urban development. In particular, in the effort to create better cities, it is necessary to take a holistic view of urban sustainability, a view which integrates economic, social, environmental, cultural and architectural aspects, as well as transportation. The Ministers also stressed the significance of socially sustainable development in improving social cohesion. Urban development should be seen as something much more than a technical discipline, and the Ministers emphasized the role of social and environmental aspects. It is important to take into account the inputs of the active and engaged citizen. Particular attention should be paid to education, training, research and information in order to give citizens better resources for promoting sustainable development in their everyday life. They should also be helped to assess the effects of decisions and actions on the implementation of the goals of sustainable development.

16) The Ministers considered the global dimension of sustainable urban development and sustainable housing, and in particular, appropriate European contributions to international co-operation in these areas. In this context, they took note of the results of the European Expert Meeting on Sustainable Urban Development, held in Copenhagen in June 1999, and of the Expert Group Meeting on the Relationship between the Habitat Agenda and Agenda 21, which was held in Helsinki in September 1999. They confirmed their governments' intentions to actively participate in the preparation of the Special Session of the General Assembly for an Overall Review and Appraisal of the Implementation of the Habitat Agenda (Istanbul+5), scheduled for June 2001, and requested their experts to prepare substantive and coordinated contributions for this review. In this context they invited the Commission to contribute actively to a coherent EU role.

17) The Ministers agreed that attention should be paid to the new possibilities for obtaining funding for sustainable urban development within the EU Structural Funds, the Community initiative URBAN, the financial instrument LIFE Environment and, if adopted by the Council, the Community co-operation framework promoting sustainable development. Sustainable urban development should also be one of the key actions under CITY OF TOMORROW and CULTURAL HERITAGE in the 5th Framework Programme.

18) The Ministers welcomed the European Commission's offer of the possibility to use a Database on Good Practice in Urban Management and Sustainability. The Commission's database covers case studies of integrated urban management, urban regeneration, social inclusion, Local Agenda 21 processes, and so on.

IV

19) The Ministers found that in the future also, the annual meeting of housing ministers will provide good opportunities to exchange views and experiences, thus providing a basis for a better, shared understanding of national housing and housing policies in EU Member States. The Ministers also welcomed the continuation of dealing with a particular theme for each meeting, and recommended Member States to prepare reports on this theme with the host country providing a summary.

20) The Ministers considered that the outline format for regular national progress reports on housing development in European countries, annexed to this communiqué, provided a good model for systematically exchanging information on general housing and housing policy developments on a regular basis. This also includes sustainable housing, building and urban development. The Ministers invited officials to examine how this work might be taken forward in detail, with a view to Member States preparing national housing policy progress reports for the 2000 meeting of the housing ministers. The host country was requested to compile these national reports and to prepare a short analysis of them for discussion between the Ministers at their meeting in 2000. They also emphasized the importance of comparable information in further reporting and statistics.

21) In housing on the whole and in housing policies, there are also challenges which all Member States are confronted with. In the solutions to these problems, the Ministers stressed the importance of exchanging knowledge and experiences. Additionally, common political stands on common issues play a main role. The Ministers considered that the exchange of information and experiences should be made more efficient and, to this end, suggested that the European Commission should support the co-operation between Member States, within its own budget, for example by organizing meetings, supporting the preparation of housing ministers' meetings and publishing data. The Ministers appealed to the European Commission to take an active interest in the publication of EU housing statistics.

22) The Ministers recommended an experts' meeting on how to improve housing statistics for the EU area. In this connection the meeting would also discuss how to achieve the thematic review on housing policies in EU countries. The expert meeting should also explore the potential of the Internet in this respect. This meeting will take place in 1999, and the European Commission and Eurostat would also be invited.

23) At the invitation of France, who will take over the [Presidency](#) during the second half of 2000, the Ministers agreed that the next annual meeting of housing ministers will take place in September 2000 in France. The main theme of this meeting will be the way in which public policies facilitate access to housing.

Kuopio 28 September 1999