



Sustainable and safe housing for people fleeing the war in Ukraine – what can the Safe Homes Initiative offer?

September 20th, 2022
Online debate

Background

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has so far led to an estimated 12 million people fleeing the war, of which over 5 million looked for protection in Europe - the largest displacement of people in Europe since World War II. All around Europe, private individuals, grassroots efforts, and solidarity movements have taken over state's role in housing provision for Ukrainian refugees, particularly in the neighbouring countries. Member States have reported that the figures of displaced people accommodated by private hosts are between 20 per cent and up to 90 per cent, in some countries. The European Commission is calling it a “tectonic shift”¹ and “an unprecedented show of solidarity, marking a new reality for EU reception and crisis management systems.”²

The Commission has rolled out various plans and actions to support Member States in meeting the needs of the millions of Ukrainians fleeing the war, including guidelines on access to housing and a new Safe Homes Initiative.³ As part of the Safe Homes Initiative, on the 6th of July a *Guidance on Safe Homes* was launched, with the goal to support the efforts of Member States, regional and local authorities and civil society in organising private housing initiatives for those in need of protection.⁴

Remarkable citizens-led and other local initiatives have been paving the way to addressing the current crisis and have shown unprecedented involvement and solidarity in receiving Ukrainian refugees. They created new types of partnerships and developed innovative tools such as matching and vetting platforms for Europeans who want to make their homes available for Ukrainian refugees. These initiatives have become part of the European response to the high numbers of people searching protection in Europe and they need to be recognised as such.

Nevertheless, as the conflict in Ukraine is ongoing and people continue to search for shelter in MS, signs of fatigue and frustration appear in this type of approaches, as they lack sustainability. Given the limitations of the private hosting, it is high time to reflect on how the lessons learnt can help define sustainable solutions for future reception and housing needs. This event aims to bring together relevant stakeholders and to create the space for these reflections.

Objective of the debate

In light of the European Commission's launch of the Safe Homes Guidance, the Housing Solutions Platform, a joint initiative by Fondation Abbé Pierre, FEANTSA and Housing Europe, organised an online debate with the aim of getting a better understanding of the initiative and how it can actually respond to the housing needs of the refugees fleeing Ukraine. Experts from both European and grassroots level together with representatives of the European Commission reflected on opportunities and risks linked to the provision of private accommodation. Discussants reflected on what further EU-level support is possible and needed for long term housing solutions, beyond private accommodation.

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/johansson/announcements/commissioner-johanssons-speech-safe-homes-solidarity-platform_en

² https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-07/Safe%20homes%20guidance_en.pdf

³ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/communication_welcoming_those_fleeing_war_in_ukraine.pdf

⁴ https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-07/Safe%20homes%20guidance_en.pdf



Main takeaways from the debate

During the first panel of the HSP debate --‘Understanding the Safe Homes Initiative’ we learned more about the initiative from the European Commission representative Angelique Petrīts, Policy Officer in the Legal Pathways and Integration unit DG HOME. Angelique Petrīts described the different aspects considered by the initiative to make accommodation safe and appropriate for people in search of protection. The importance of Partnerships was also mentioned, between different stakeholders to ensure sustainable solutions. The New European Bauhaus can offer solutions for creating sustainable housing in emergency situations. Community sponsorships based on partnerships between the state, civil society and private individuals were signalled as extremely important to help find solutions, while underlining that this is complementary to the state solutions and will not replace it. Information on funding was presented as well: the European Social Fund – funds assisted programs for housing, social services to support housing and rent subsidies; the European Recovery and Development Fund – can support more directly building, refurbishing and purchasing of non-segregated individual social housing; the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund – 400 million Euros were made available to the most affected MS; CARE Regulation – allows further flexibility where ESF and ERDF can be combined and used retroactively, for example, something that was not possible before; New unit cost introduced by the Common Provisions Regulation, Article 68c (for more details consult [DG HOME presentation](#)).

The EC is addressing the issue of long-term accommodation by supporting MS, as the Commission reacts to the needs and provides with support (initiatives and guidelines) when MS come with a request.

Two good practices presented the initiatives they implemented to support refugees arriving from Ukraine. The initiatives developed innovative tools and cross sectoral partnerships to support those Europeans who are making their homes available to refugees:

- Lucia Pašková, coordinator of the initiative ‘Kto pomôže Ukrajine’/‘Who will help Ukraine’, implemented in Slovakia, which is a web portal organised by the NGO sector and philanthropists. The programme was set up at the beginning of the war, without having a legal status. The arrangement of the accommodation was inspired from Airbnb and Booking, by initially collecting as much as possible data. A google form was set up where hosts could register when they had available accommodation, mentioning if it was free or paid. Details on conditions of the accommodation and how to get in contact were collected as well. Given that discrimination was an issue in general within the country, transparency was important from the beginning in order to prevent situations of racism and to ensure safe places for people who were part of LGBT communities or third country nationals, for example. To ensure secure accommodation several apps were used, facilitating communication and for collecting data (for more details consult [‘Who will help Ukraine’ presentation](#)).
- Ara Trianes Salguero, Head of Services and Elizabeth Peña, Director of Services at Peter McVerry Trust in Ireland presented their work with pledged accommodation in partnership with local authorities. Several options were made available to ensure a positive response to the high number of people searching protection in Ireland: *Direct Accommodation Options* (Private Sector – hotels, guesthouses; procuring through Statutory mechanisms – Housing Agency; Emergency Provision through Local Authorities – Rest Centres and Military Camps; Establish Implementation Partners around the Pledged Accommodation) and *Indirect Accommodation Options* (Pledged Accommodation where citizens signed up to pledge property, standalone or shared which were vetted by local authorities). An initial strong community response took place, with thousands of people pledging accommodation online. In time, however, some retracted their pledge, or they were not deemed appropriate, so the overall existing offer has reduced.



Recommendations from the two initiatives to address needs on the ground:

- Long term housing is needed; many people are staying in the northern part of Ukraine where they have no heating, and we should be ready for an increase in the numbers of people moving towards Europe once temperatures will drop.
- Fast communication regarding the financial support that hosts can receive from the Government or the EU, as many people are at risk of having to leave their accommodation because the state did not announce that there will be prolonged periods of pay-outs. It is essential to communicate fast and clear that there will be continuous support, do not wait until the last minute.
- Additional support to the owners of the properties will be needed to encourage the current agreements to stay in place or to encourage new pledges.

The second panel of the debate discussed the opportunities and risks linked to private accommodation and solutions for long term housing. Moderation of the panel was done by Freek Spinnewijn, Director of FEANTSA and the discussants were Pierre Verbeeren (President of Bruss'Help and Ukraine Coordinator for Brussels Gouvernement and the Cocom, Belgium), Katarzyna Przybylska (Senior Advocacy Manager at Habitat for Humanity, Poland), Ave Lauren (Migration Policy Analyst, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)) and Alice Pittini (Research Director, Housing Europe).

Summary of the points raised (for details, please watch the recording):

- In Brussels, there was a habitus to work with private accommodation before the war in Ukraine (currently 8000 people are estimated to be housed privately; 80% are housing people for about 5-6 months). In 2015 and 2017, this was tested, and the Federal Government in Belgium has asked private citizens to host refugees, it was recognised as part of the institutional solution. Therefore, it was easy to engage with this type of support when the Ukrainian refugees have arrived more recently. It was also possible to progressively get the support of the regional authorities to support private initiatives. The institutional support at this stage is defined through a type of a contract between the host and the hosted person. It is not a usual rent contract but it foresees a fee paid by the guest which is exempted by the usual housing mechanism. It also includes a code of conduct, because it is very important to define hosting conditions. A community approach is also used, which is built with the Ukrainian refugees. For each area (e.g.: education, health, etc) a person is employed from the community with a mediation role, and they come in and discuss details and communicate with the Ukrainian people residing in Brussels. To complement this, a survey is applied to Ukrainian refugees directly. Through the hosts, longer-term solutions are being looked for, to maximise access to the private housing market.
- It is important to recognise that private initiatives are part of the solution, without blaming the state and making a failure out of this type of responses; we must recognise the community as a resource. For a positive response we must avoid as much as possible to use institutional housing facilities but try to find solutions in the private market in the long term and for sustainability, as we know that camps, institutions, shelters are the worst solutions for refugees.
- On the issue of double standards in the treatment of refugees it was noted that the current referral initiative implemented at the level of Brussels will be used to create a narrative that can be applied to all refugees and also to all people experiencing homelessness; this experience organised in Brussels for Ukrainian refugees will be creating a new standard in ensuring accommodation for all.
- It is noted that the Safe Homes initiative of the Commission has not reached the relevant stakeholders at national governmental level, thus the initiative has not reached its target.



- OECD has published a number of policy briefs since the invasion of Ukraine on the situation of refugees and perhaps one of the key takeaways is that when looking at the policies responses in general, housing seems to be the area where the OECD countries struggles the most. It is where the answer has been mostly reactive and not prepared, not using pre-planned contingency approaches. A second key conclusion is that a majority of the OECD countries have relied on the private households to actually meet the challenges. This has been the main pillar in the response to the crisis, it is not a side support. A third point is that only when the flows started to stabilise countries turned their attention to assessing the systems – safeguards were set in place from the beginning, but they were not institutional. And here, the Safe Homes initiative can have a role in making these safeguards institutional. The fourth point highlighted in the OECD brief is that transition to long term housing is not quite happening. There are numerous measures to support this, but different challenges remain and a lot of them go to the field of housing, seeing that the housing stock is just not there. The stock was thin before the Ukraine crisis and now is even more so.
- In terms of risks regarding private housing, these are numerous, but the OECD highlights three main challenges: first, the safety risk and the risk of exploitation which remains pertinent due to the nature of the refugee flows; second big area is miscommunication and difficulties with managing expectations, and here the Safe Homes initiative has the potential to establish some ground rules that countries can rely on – for this to work, a communication at national level needs to be done about this initiative; the third challenge is the cost of living crisis – private accommodation programmes come with a significant cost for the host and considering the approaching winter and the different energy costs and the inflation, maintaining these programmes will be a major challenge. Financial support helps, but it is not sufficient.
- For moving forward, OECD makes the following recommendations: fixing the lack of housing stock - finding housing solutions for Ukrainian refugees within countries needs to be part of the long term strategy on addressing the pre-existing housing shortage; verifying systems need to be put in place and communicated well; address the question of dispersal – factors for dispersal are many and metropolitan areas are much more overwhelmed than other areas so countries need to think of different dispersal systems; OECD stresses that dispersal systems need to be built around employment.
- Habitat for Humanity points out that in Poland, according to UNHCR data, around 30% of people from Ukraine are using hosting accommodation which is discussed in the event; 21% are renting a place while 40% are using collective shelters. No camps were built, but many people do live in shelters. Poland is facing a housing crisis for a long time, severe overcrowding and lack of affordable housing stock which was made more visible by the influx of refugees from Ukraine. On the bright side, housing has finally become the main issue of discussion in the public debate, it is in the highlights. Involvement of the private sector is very new but interesting to observe, and it can be a great opportunity to improve the current situation, if used wisely.
- Concerning long term housing solutions, access to rental market needs to be improved and made more accessible. In Poland, only 6% of the total housing market is rentable. To increase the housing stock, a solution can be to renovate vacant or underused premises, as statistical office in Polish municipalities show that over 70 000 housing units are currently vacant. According to the 2021 census, around 11% of housing units in Poland are inhabited and solutions must be found to incentivise these units right now.
- Habitat for Humanity in Poland engages with a *three steps approach*: 1) Short term support for people coming to Poland (matching people with solidarity housing and making sure everyone gets housed in safety); 2) Booking hotel rooms for people coming to Poland, because hosting groups was soon limited and 3) Setting up a housing information line for both refugees and hosts. Finally, another solutions is to increase the use of midterm support, such as using social housing rental agencies, which is already established in Polish legislation.
- Cooperation and coordination are needed on the ground to make these approaches more systemic and to be able to target the most vulnerable groups, to support those who need help.



- Housing Europe raises the issue of long term solutions, while keeping in the spotlight the issue of dealing with housing affordability crisis, which is something that pre-existed the Ukraine war or the COVID19 crisis. It is the result of trends of increasing prices and to some extent, of the disengagement of MS with housing policies. A key priority remains to invest in social and affordable housing solutions for all.
- The countries which are taking in a big part of the refugees from Ukraine are also those countries facing the highest impact of inflation and where the energy costs have increased most; they also have a notably small social and affordable housing sector so the governments there will be required to make extra efforts to help all sort of households facing these problems.
- It is important to continue thinking on the long term while remembering that putting responsibility on the private sector is a risk, this should remain at a collective and public level.

Conclusions: Sorcha Edwards, Secretary-General, Housing Europe

The discussions in the short debate on the Safe Homes initiative show the need to be very creative at this time, as there is no easy way out of the current situation. We can have doubts about the approach taken by the Commission, however there is a lot of potential to build on this. The philosophy around it is to ensure that we do not have a polarisation between new arrivals and locals, which we have seen in the past in other migration waves. We also cannot shift the responsibility to private households. We must welcome and support that solidarity as much as we can through financial support and acting as guardians, ensuring safety for hosts and guests.

At the same time, we also have to recognise the limitations of this approach and appreciate that we indeed have to take a collective responsibility and look at the midterm solutions, the long-term solutions and overall shortage of affordable and social housing in the background. This must be coupled with the need for those accompanying social measures to make sure that integration is actually a success. We welcome the society approach, but we need to recognise its limitations and we do not need to go for the ‘big community, small government’ approach which has serious limitations.

MS need to step back in the housing policy arena actively because many countries have seen a setback. The EC has also recognised the need to invest in affordable and social housing. As a community, we need to continue this conversation. We cannot assume that the skills and knowledge are accessible to policy makers and that remains our work as well – to make sure that access to finance, to most up to date effective policy options are actually available to policy makers.