

Good Practice in the Provision of Housing to Vulnerable People

Survey Report 2023

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Mission of the Defender

Since 2001, the Defender has been defending individuals against unlawful or otherwise incorrect procedure of administrative authorities and other institutions, as well as against their inactivity. The Defender may peruse administrative and court files, request explanations from the authorities and carry out unannounced inquiries on site. If the Defender finds errors in the activities of an authority and fails to achieve a remedy, the Defender may inform the superior authority or the public.

Since 2006, the Defender has acted in the capacity of the national preventive mechanism pursuant to the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The Defender systematically visits facilities where persons are restricted in their freedom, either ex officio or as a result of dependence on the care provided. The purpose of the visits is to strengthen protection against ill-treatment. The Defender generalises his or her findings and recommendations in summary reports on visits and formulates standards of treatment on their basis. Recommendations of the Defender concerning improvement of the conditions ascertained and elimination of ill-treatment, if applicable, are directed both to the facilities themselves and their operators as well as to central governmental authorities.

In 2009, the Defender assumed the role of the national equality body. The Defender thus contributes to the enforcement of the right to equal treatment of all persons regardless of their race or ethnicity, nationality, sex/gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, belief or worldview. For that purpose, the Defender provides assistance to victims of discrimination, carries out surveys, publishes reports and issues recommendations with respect to matters of discrimination, and ensures exchange of the available information with the relevant European bodies.

Since 2011, the Defender has also been monitoring the detention of foreign nationals and the performance of administrative expulsion.

In January 2018, the Defender became a monitoring body for the implementation of rights recognised in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, also helping European Union citizens who live and work in the Czech Republic. The Defender provides them with information on their rights and helps them in cases of suspected discrimination on grounds of their citizenship.

The special powers of the Defender include the right to file a petition with the Constitutional Court, seeking the annulment of a secondary legal regulation, the right to become an enjoined party in Constitutional Court proceedings on the annulment of a law or its part, the right to lodge an administrative action to protect a general interest or to file an application to initiate disciplinary proceedings with the president or vice-president of a court. The Defender may also recommend that a relevant public authority issue, amend or cancel a legal or internal regulation. The Defender advises the Government to amend laws.

The Defender is independent and impartial, and accountable for the performance of his or her office to the Chamber of Deputies, which elected him or her as the Defender. The Defender has one elected deputy, who can be authorised to assume some of the Defender's competences. The Defender regularly informs the public of his or her findings through the media, web, social networks, professional workshops, roundtables and conferences. The most important findings and recommendations are summarised in the Annual Report on the Activities of the Public Defender of Rights submitted to the Chamber of Deputies.

Glossary of useful terms

Housing need – is defined by the ETHOS typology¹ (European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion). People in housing need are not only those who are roofless (i.e. living rough) or houseless (e.g. staying in shelters or residential hostels), but also households living in housing that is inadequate (e.g. overcrowded) or insecure (temporary housing with relatives or after the termination of legal tenancy).

Person with a psychosocial disability – a person who suffers from a perceived or actual disability that affects their cognitive abilities, including mental disability, mental illness, autism spectrum disorders, post-traumatic brain injury conditions and others.

Deinstitutionalisation – the transition from institutional care for people with disabilities to care provided in the community.

Discrimination – generally, making distinctions between people based on their membership of a particular group, regardless of their abilities or other aspects of their personality. The Anti-Discrimination Act defines discrimination as less favourable treatment of certain people on the basis of specific protected characteristics and in certain areas of life, which the Act itself defines.

Protected characteristic (ground of discrimination) – one of the characteristics (grounds of discrimination) listed by the Anti-Discrimination Act (i.e. race, ethnicity, “nationality” (in the sense of “national origin” – in Czech: národnost), sex including gender identity, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, faith or worldview, nationality (in the sense of “State citizenship” – in Czech: státní příslušnost)) or some other legal regulations, which may not be used to discriminate among individuals.

Contribution towards housing – a material need benefit that serves to cover costs associated with housing.

¹ FEANTSA (European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless). ETHOS – European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion in the Czech Republic, Online. Available at: <https://www.feantsa.org/download/ethos2484215748748239888.pdf> [retrieved on: 2023-11-09].

Halfway house – a social service. A halfway house provides residential services, usually for people up to the age of 26 who leave institutional care when they reach the age of majority and for people who are released from a custodial sentence or forensic treatment.

Mental illness – a condition characterised by impaired cognitive functions and/or emotions, abnormal behaviour, impaired social functioning or any combination of the above. These disorders cannot be explained by environmental factors alone: physical, genetic, chemical, social and other factors can also contribute.²

Housing First – an approach prioritising the initial settling-in of a person in housing need, and only then addressing any further issues such as debts, employment, health etc.

Housing Ready – an approach based on the assumption that a person must first be prepared for housing. Housing is provided gradually, usually in several stages, including training flats. Standard housing represents the final stage of the process. A person should first stabilise their life situation and acquire the skills needed to live independently.

Protected housing – a social service. Residential service provided to people with reduced self-reliance owing to disability or chronic illness, including mental illness, whose situation requires the assistance of another person.

Security deposit – a refundable deposit paid by the tenant to the landlord. If rent payments are overdue or if any damage is caused to the flat or its furnishings, the landlord can use the security deposit to cover the debt or damage.

People with disabilities – people who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.

Extraordinary immediate assistance – a benefit provided within assistance in material need which can be used to cover the cost of a security deposit, if the relevant legal conditions are met.

Peer worker – a link between the staff and clients of social services. A person who has direct experience with the target group's way of life who has been able to overcome the specific problems faced by people belonging to that group.

Support for independent living – a social service. A field service provided to people with reduced self-reliance owing to disability or chronic illness, including mental illness, whose situation requires the assistance of another person.

Social service provider – a legal or natural person authorised to provide social services under the Social Services Act. With regard to housing need, this may include social services such as shelters, support for independent living, sheltered housing and others.

Housing allowance – a State income support benefit that helps to cover costs associated with housing.

Aftercare services – a social service. These are outpatient or residential services provided to people with chronic mental illness and people addicted to dependency producing substances.

Social worker – a professional with expertise under the Social Services Act who works at a local authority or in social services. Their role is to help clients manage problematic interactions with their social environment, to point them to existing resources whenever they need such resources but are unable to access them on their own, or when their efforts to access them are hindered by various obstacles. Together with clients and other actors, they help to integrate clients back into the normal social life, and seek and participate in the creation of

² The Ministry of Health. National Health Information Portal. Online. Available (in Czech) at: <https://www.nzip.cz/rejstrikovy-pojem/340> [retrieved on: 2023-12-06].

appropriate favourable conditions for clients to live in their natural community. They help to defend the rights and interests of clients or target groups when they are not being respected.

Social real estate agency – similar to a regular real estate agency, these agencies provide real estate services, typically rental mediation, but focus on seeking landlords willing to rent their flats to people who are disadvantaged on the regular market.

Social rehabilitation – a social service. A set of specific activities aimed at achieving the independence, autonomy and self-reliance of individuals by developing their specific abilities and skills, building habits and training in the performance of ordinary activities necessary for independent living, while doing this in an alternative way, using the individuals' preserved abilities, potential and competences.

Social service – an activity or set of activities under the Social Services Act that provide assistance and support to people with a view to achieving their social inclusion or preventing their social exclusion.

Stigmatisation and destigmatisation – stigmatisation is the evaluation or assessment of certain traits or characteristics of a person as less desirable or unacceptable. Stigmatised people are also perceived by others as less valuable because of certain characteristics or traits. An individual is being socially excluded on the basis of these traits, which together constitute a stigma. Stigmatisation can be the result of a lack of knowledge, fear, prejudice and discrimination. Destigmatisation, on the other hand, is a process aimed at reducing or eliminating a stigma.

Labour offices – individual branches of the Labour Office of the Czech Republic (regional branches or contact points of regional branches).

Settling-in – the process of finding and retaining housing with a certain level of support.

Vulnerable people – in our methodology, this term refers to people who have a reduced ability to obtain and maintain decent housing due to their own limitations or the prevailing social climate. In particular, we mean people whose access to housing is hindered because they exhibit one of the protected characteristics (such as disability, ethnicity and parenthood).

List of abbreviations

ESF – European Social Fund

IROP – Integrated Regional Operational Programme

BSLPC – body of social and legal protection of children

OPE – Operational Programme “Employment”

MoLSA – Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs

Mol – Ministry of the Interior

Foreword

In my work as the Public Defender of Rights, I regularly receive complaints from people facing obstacles in finding adequate housing. Those who are at risk of housing need include, among others, the elderly, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities and families with children. The availability of suitable housing and its quality also significantly affect other areas of a person's life. These factors determine whether people will have adequate conditions for raising children. They affect how such people can access healthcare, and they also play a crucial role in terms of the certainty of future housing and the ensuing stress. That being said, most serious are the impacts on children, as life in substandard conditions can seriously affect their future life trajectories. Moreover, rising housing and energy costs are putting a constantly growing group of people at risk of housing need.

Such a state of affairs obviously has an impact not only on those who face the negative consequences of housing need, but on society as a whole. As a matter of fact, even the Constitutional Court has stated that long-term uncertainty regarding housing can undermine citizens' confidence in democracy and the rule of law.³

The Public Defender of Rights is unable to secure housing for people in need on his own. However, the Defender can help these individuals with arranging housing benefits, call attention to the lack of housing suitable for people with disabilities, and advise them on how to defend themselves against discrimination in access to housing, as discrimination can be one of the causes of housing need.

However, the Defender should not limit his activities to providing methodological assistance to victims of discrimination, but should also contribute to the overall promotion of the right to equal treatment. One way to meet this challenge is to spread examples of good practice.

Although the Czech Republic still lacks a law that would ensure the availability of housing for people disadvantaged on the regular housing market, a number of organisations work on projects to improve housing accessibility. This time, therefore, I decided to focus on those who help people to make housing more affordable.

3 Judgement of the Constitutional Court of 25 April 2023, File No. II. ÚS 2533/20, paragraph 28, [usoud.cz](https://www.usoud.cz).

The intention of my survey was to find examples of good practice in housing provision across different regions and target groups. I wanted to contribute to a better understanding of what was going well and what options should be prioritised. This all, however, would not be possible without an analysis of the main obstacles hindering access to normal housing. This exercise also inherently includes the identification of systemic deficiencies which must be addressed by the State. All of this is contained in our survey titled “Good practice in the provision of housing to vulnerable people”.

I would like to thank all the organisations and individuals who participated in the survey and shared their experience with us. It is only because of their openness that this could be done. I appreciate that they devoted their time to the survey.

I sincerely hope this text will prove to be an inspiration to your work.

Summary

1. **Most organisations do not have difficulties finding available flats.** In fact, organisations helping people to settle-in would be able to find even more flats to this end, but they lack the staff needed to support these projects.
2. **The organisations involved are more likely to reach out to the private sector when seeking flats suitable for settling-in activities.** Arrangements with homeowners are usually faster and more flexible, and moreover, the number of privately owned flats is much higher than the number of flats owned by municipalities. On top of that, the process of applying for the allocation of municipal housing is often cumbersome and bureaucratic, with uncertain results. Many municipalities also lack political will to support settling-in projects.
3. Three basic safeguards that a normal tenancy relationship cannot provide have proven to be an incentive for landlords in this regard:
 - » guarantee of regular rent payments;
 - » guarantee of decent handling of the flat and its furnishing, and repair of any potential damage;
 - » effective resolution of any neighbourhood disputes.
4. The success of settling-in activities is significantly helped by a **guarantee fund**, which serves as a financial backup to cover shortfalls in rent payments and other client obligations.
5. The organisations involved agree that it is desirable to pay due attention to **neighbour disputes**. Any complaints need to be checked in terms of their justification and, if necessary, the client should be assisted in achieving remedy. **Open communication and face-to-face negotiations** involving all the parties prove beneficial for resolving any disputes.
6. Work with the client should be based on an **individualised approach, openness and mutual respect**. A relationship built on mutual trust allows the organisation's staff to identify in due time any problems that, if not addressed, could lead to a loss of housing.

7. It is advisable to **involve** the client as much as possible in the settling-in process. It is also beneficial to engage as **peer workers** former clients and possibly other people with relevant experience.
8. In order to ensure successful functioning, most organisations consider it appropriate to **consistently separate the real estate and social aspects, i.e. the provision of housing, on the one hand, and support for the client in settling-in through social work, on the other hand**. This reduces the risk of a conflict of roles, where the worker in question must always defend the client's interests, but might be forced to collect the rent due and possibly to ensure the client's eviction. Such a conflict of roles could undermine the mutual trust between the client and the social worker.
9. The organisations involved **benefit from co-operation with other entities** that can also help the clients. **Networking** is beneficial not only for the clients, but also for the organisations themselves, because close contacts with similar organisations can give them opportunity to share their experience, and gain inspiration and support for their work. Close co-operation among entities with a similar social mission also has the added advantage that they can set up their services in such a way as to complement each other with respect to the needs in the region.
10. Some organisations point to **shortcomings in the operation of labour offices**, especially **delays in processing benefits**, as a significant obstacle in this regard.
11. **Funding** for settling-in activities is mostly insufficient and many organisations use resources from various grant projects. While this allows for their greater development, including staffing, it also carries the **risk of uncertainty in the long term**. As housing is an area where success or failure can only be assessed over a number of years, short-term projects (lasting one or two years) always come with a risk regarding their sustainability.
12. Housing is difficult to access for many people from vulnerable groups. There is still no legal framework in the Czech Republic that would define the obligations of municipalities and governmental institutions in the provision of housing in a detailed and binding manner. **The lack of special housing legislation has been identified by the organisations involved as a major systemic barrier.**

Legislation

1. Right to housing

Although there have been decades of debates about the need to enact a law on social housing, legislation of this kind is still missing in the Czech legal environment. People in need often turn to their municipalities for help with housing. However, municipalities have no legal obligations in this regard. The law contains only a vague provision that municipalities, acting in independent competence in their territorial district, also have the task to create, in view of the local circumstances and customs, conditions for the development of social care and satisfying the needs of their citizens, including, among other things, the satisfaction of housing needs.⁴ However, it is up to the discretion of the municipalities themselves whether they will provide any flats to their citizens, and if so, under what conditions. Some of them have decided to provide social housing, also thanks to support provided by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs through the Support for Social Housing project.⁵ Others, however, do not provide housing at all or do not target people from vulnerable groups in this respect.

That being said, the right to housing is part of the right to an adequate standard of living, guaranteed by the International Covenant on Economic, Cultural and Social Rights. The latter states that the right to an adequate standard of living also includes housing.⁶ Similarly, the right to housing can be subsumed under the right to social protection enshrined in the European Social Charter. In the Charter, the Contracting Parties undertook to promote the social protection of family life, including through the provision of housing to ensure the necessary conditions for the full development of the family.⁷

While international rules require that the State guarantee these rights to its citizens, without translating them into specific national legislation, they do not give people many options to enforce these rights. This is also the situation in the Czech Republic, which still lacks special legislation on social housing or any other regulation

4 Section 35 (2) of Act No. 128/2000 Coll., on municipalities (the Municipal Order).

5 The project titled “Support for social housing and its systemic implementation in the Czech Republic”, implemented within the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and the OPE+: <https://www.mpsv.cz/web/cz/projekt-podpora-socialniho-bydleni>.

6 Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Cultural and Social Rights, promulgated under No. 120/1976 Coll.

7 Article 16 of the European Social Charter, promulgated under No 14/2000 Coll. of Int. Tr.

that would secure people's right to effective assistance in housing need through the provision of housing. The Constitutional Court has also criticised the current state of affairs, as it described the degree of housing need and (the lack of) its institutional solution as follows: "A wealthy society like the one in the Czech Republic cannot leave an individual to live on the streets, without shelter, or in everyday uncertainty whether they will have a roof over their head, unless this is their free decision. The obligation of the State (enshrined in international conventions ...) to provide housing for everyone in need and especially to vulnerable persons (e.g. families with children, the elderly) is unfortunately not directly enforceable. However, it is shameful that the Czech Republic has been violating its commitment to take adequate steps to provide housing as it has yet to adopt a law on social housing and has no institutional means of protecting homeless people. Vulnerable people cannot be left to the care of charities, volunteers or NGOs alone; such an approach clearly violates our international commitments."⁸ Although in the court's opinion, the State is violating its international obligations by failing to adequately address housing need, people have no legal means to defend themselves against such inaction.

Thus, in the conditions of the Czech Republic, the right to housing remains only a legal concept, rather than a truly enforceable right.

2. Assistance in housing need through social benefits

Although the right to housing is not enforceable as such, it has a link to the right to assistance in material need, which is guaranteed by the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms. Everyone who suffers from material need has the right to such assistance as is necessary to ensure them a basic living standard.⁹ The State then translated this right into the statutory regulation of social benefits.

In cases where housing need owes mainly to high housing costs, people can take advantage not only of a housing allowance¹⁰, but also of a contribution towards housing¹¹, which can also be granted for such forms of housing as a residential hostel (in Czech: ubytovna), non-residential space or part of a flat. However, a great many beneficiaries receive a contribution towards housing while living in substandard housing, especially in various residential hostels, dormitories and premises not primarily intended for (permanent) housing. The contribution then ends up with the owners of these facilities, who provide overpriced housing to persons in material need, thus abusing not only the low social status of these people, but also the financial assistance from the State.¹²

In addition to the high cost of housing as such, people in need also face the obstacle of high entry costs, most often in the form of the landlord's requirement for a security deposit or the need to pay a commission to an intermediary (real estate agent). The landlord may require a security deposit of up to three times the monthly rent.¹³ If the applicable legal conditions are met, these costs can also be covered by an assistance in material need benefit, specifically by a one-off benefit referred to as "extraordinary immediate assistance".¹⁴ Where justified, this benefit can also be granted to cover the housing costs themselves, in cases where housing could be lost due to an unforeseeable event such as the Covid-19 pandemic or an energy crisis.¹⁵

What is also important to the implementation of the right to assistance is the actual manner of operation of the authorities that decide on the benefits, in this case the regional branches of the Labour Office, or rather their individual contact points. Authorities should generally act predictably, i.e. make similar decisions

8 Judgement of the Czech Constitutional Court of 25 April 2023, File No. II. ÚS 2533/20, [usoud.cz](https://www.usoud.cz).

9 Art. 30 (2) of the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms.

10 A State income support benefit provided under Section 24 et seq. of Act No. 117/1995 Coll., on State income support.

11 An assistance in material need benefit provided under Section 33 et seq. of Act No. 111/2006 Coll., on assistance in material need.

12 Pospíšil, I.: Ústavněprávní východiska práva na bydlení a možnosti jeho realizace: od vyplácení dávek po zajištění důstojného bydlení. (Constitutional Foundations of the Right to Housing and Options for its Implementation: From the Payment of Benefits to the Provision of Decent Housing.) In: Sociální pomoc na rozcestí? (Social Assistance at a Crossroads?) Proceedings of the professional symposium of the Office of the Public Defender of Rights, 19–20 October 2017, Brno. Ed. Jiří Hrubý.

13 Section 2254 (1) of Act No. 89/2012 Coll., the Civil Code.

14 An assistance in material need benefit provided under Section 36 et seq. of the Assistance in Material Need Act.

15 Section 2 (4)(b) of the Assistance in Material Need Act.

in similar situations, and do so in a timely manner.¹⁶ In practice, however, the procedures at individual contact points are often inconsistent and the decision-making process is protracted.

As regards the inconsistent procedure in deciding on benefits, this can occur especially in the case of decisions on extraordinary immediate assistance. It is a matter of administrative discretion whether and, if so, in what amount extraordinary immediate assistance will be granted. However, the margin of appreciation on the part of the individual staff members of the Labour Office is not without boundaries. The MoLSA and the Directorate General of the Labour Office of the Czech Republic issue methodological guidelines to unify the procedures of individual contact points.

This is also how the Directorate General of the Labour Office regulates the procedure in granting extraordinary immediate assistance to cover the tenant's cost of security deposit.¹⁷ According to this guideline, such extraordinary assistance can be used not only for the transition from a non-standard to standard form of housing (e.g. from the street to a flat), but also to maintain a standard form of housing (i.e. a flat) in cases where this is justified. The benefit can be granted up to the full amount of the security deposit, i.e. up to three times the monthly rent. However, this depends on the specific circumstances of each case, such as the amount of the applicant's income or whether they have already received a benefit in the past to cover the cost of security deposit. Such methodological guidelines are binding on the individual staff members of the Labour Office. Hence, if an employee of the Labour Office proceeds at variance with the guidelines in a specific case, this can be pleaded in an objection¹⁸ or appeal¹⁹.

As regards possible delays, the Public Defender of Rights noticed an increased number of complaints in the autumn of 2022, with regard to the processing and payment of State income support benefits at the Labour Office's regional branch for the capital city of Prague. The Defender therefore launched an inquiry into the matter, which ultimately revealed that the delays were mainly due to staff shortages.²⁰ The situation improved after the MoLSA, in co-operation with the Directorate General of the Labour Office, took some measures in this regard. In the meantime, however, the delays negatively impacted many people in need. Some of them had to become indebted due to the shortfalls in benefits. In several cases, protracted decision-making on benefits even led to a loss of housing. Where the problem is not of systemic nature, certain measures can be requested to address the Labour Office's failure to make a timely decision.²¹

Despite certain shortcomings in the provision of benefits, it is true that people in housing need can make use of this assistance to improve their situation or to bridge a crisis period. However, the provision of social benefits does not represent sufficient implementation of the right to housing, and the State must also guarantee an effective and efficient access to decent housing.²²

3. The right to assistance from social workers and social services

Given that the State does not secure the right to decent housing, many people are left to live in substandard forms of housing, such as various shelters and residential hostels, live in overcrowded flats with their relatives, or have to settle for living in poor-quality flats or insecure forms of housing. Some end up homeless and their children in institutions.

16 Průprava dobrých správ. (Principles of Good Governance.) Public Defender of Rights – Ombudsman [online]. Brno: Office of the Public Defender of Rights. Available (in Czech) at: <https://www.ochrance.cz/dokument/principy-dobre-spravy/principy-dobre-spravy.pdf> [retrieved on: 2023-11-10].

17 Communication from the Head of the Non-Insured Social Benefits Department No. 10/2022, dated 1 September 2022.

18 Section 76 of the Assistance in Material Need Act.

19 Section 77 of the Assistance in Material Need Act.

20 Annual Report on the Activities of the Public Defender of Rights in 2022, p. 72, available (in English) at: https://www.ochrance.cz/en/dokument/annual_report_2022/annual_report_2022.pdf.

21 Section 80 of Act No. 500/2004 Coll., the Code of Administrative Procedure.

22 Judgement of the Czech Constitutional Court of 25 April 2023, File No. II. ÚS 2533/20, [usoud.cz](https://www.usoud.cz).

Housing need therefore usually represents a social adverse situation, i.e. a life situation that the individual is no longer able to deal with on their own.²³ Every person who finds themselves in this situation has the right to ask for help in resolving it.²⁴ The authorities of municipalities with extended competence are required to provide such assistance by means of social work.²⁵ However, without available housing, the social workers approached by people in housing need have very limited options to help these people. As also voiced by social workers themselves, social work needs functional tools to help effectively. These tools must be provided by the State and by regional and local governments. Without such social policy tools, social workers are powerless.²⁶ This is also true of helping people in housing need, which is very difficult without available housing.

People in housing need can also seek help from social service providers, some of whom focus directly on people in housing need or with difficult access to standard housing.

People who are homeless or have lost their homes can use overnight accommodation facilities²⁷ and shelters²⁸. However, these social services offer only a temporary solution and cannot replace stable housing in a standard flat.

Accommodation for people with disabilities or mental illness is also provided by sheltered housing providers²⁹. For those who need help from another person because of their reduced self-reliance, there is also the independent living support service³⁰, which helps people with things like running a household.

However, social services are not available everywhere to an extent sufficient to cover the demand. In addition, many people in housing need do not fall within the target groups of social services or do not meet the conditions for admission to the service. Social services alone therefore cannot solve housing need. As a matter of fact, that is not their goal either. Assistance through social services should promote the development of independence and support social inclusion.³¹ Wherever possible, independent living in a flat, albeit with some level of support, better serves this goal than the use of social services as a consequence of unaffordable housing.

4. Discrimination in access to housing

One of the reasons why some people find themselves in housing need is discrimination. While the law prohibits discrimination in access to housing³², this in itself does not mean that discrimination does not occur in reality.

The prohibition of discrimination binds both municipalities and private entrepreneurs, homeowners and real estate agents. It applies to all entities that offer or provide housing to the public.³³ It must therefore not exclude or disadvantage applicants for housing on the grounds defined by the Anti-Discrimination Act: race,

23 According to of Section 3 (b) of Act No. 108/2006 Coll., on social services, “socially adverse situation” is understood as the weakening or loss of the ability due to age, adverse health condition, crisis social situation, life habits and way of life leading to conflict with society, socially disadvantaging environment, threat to rights and interests by criminal activity perpetrated by another natural person or due to other serious reasons to resolve the situation in such a way that the solution promotes social inclusion and protection against social exclusion.

24 Section 2 of the Social Services Act.

25 Section 92 (d) of the Social Services Act.

26 “Another round of debts and foreclosures is imminent and social workers are powerless in current circumstances,” says the Social Worker of the Year. [www.a2larm.cz](https://a2larm.cz) [online]. Prague: Denik Alarm, z.ú., 2023. Available (in Czech) at: <https://a2larm.cz/2023/04/zacina-dalsi-kolo-zadluzovani-a-exekuci-socialni-prace-na-soucasnou-reality-nejstaci-rika-socialni-pracovnik-roku/> [retrieved on: 2023-11-09].

27 Section 63 of the Social Services Act.

28 Section 57 of the Social Services Act.

29 Section 51 of the Social Services Act.

30 Section 43 of the Social Services Act.

31 Section 2 (2) of the Social Services Act.

32 Section 1 (1)(j) of Act No. 198/2009 Coll., on equal treatment and legal remedies for protection against discrimination and on amendment to certain laws (the Anti-Discrimination Act).

33 Ibid.

ethnic origin, nationality (in the sense of national origin – in Czech: “národnost”), gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, belief or world view³⁴, and where applicable, also nationality (in the sense of State citizenship – in Czech: “státní příslušnost”)³⁵. Discrimination on grounds of parenthood (maternity or paternity) is also considered discrimination on grounds of sex.³⁶

Complainants turn to the Public Defender of Rights, who helps victims of discrimination,³⁷ claiming that they were discriminated against in access to housing on the grounds of ethnic origin, but also on the grounds of their parenthood, disability or age. Ethnicity has been the predominant ground of discrimination (protected characteristic) in anti-discrimination lawsuits; in a minority of cases, the plaintiffs alleged that they had been disadvantaged in housing because of their disability.³⁸

It is by no means easy to take action against discrimination. This requires commitment, time and often finances. Moreover, even in cases where discrimination is proven, people may not get what they need most, which is housing. And even if they succeed with their case, they might be able to obtain an apology or financial compensation, but not necessarily housing. This is also the reason why people most often do not defend themselves against discrimination³⁹, but rather look for ways to obtain decent housing despite the continuing discrimination.

Social service providers and other organisations are then the ones who – in the absence of systemic tools – try to overcome the obstacles to housing availability and help clients to resolve their housing need.

34 Section 2 (3) of the Anti-Discrimination Act.

35 The prohibition of discrimination on grounds of nationality (in the sense of State citizenship) applies only to legal relations governed by the directly applicable EU regulation on the free movement of workers.

36 Section 2 (4) of the Anti-Discrimination Act.

37 Section 1 (5), in conjunction with Section 21b of Act No. 349/1999 Coll., on the Public Defender of Rights.

38 Survey report of the Public Defender of Rights “Decision-making of Czech courts in discrimination disputes 2015–2019” of 24 September 2020, File No. 61/2019/DIS, [eso.ochrance.cz](https://www.eso.ochrance.cz), p. 97.

39 According to the Defender’s survey, only about 11% of those who experience discrimination take action in this regard. Survey report of the Public Defender of Rights “Discrimination in the Czech Republic: victims of discrimination and obstacles hindering their access to justice” of 27 February 2015, File No. 46/2014/DIS, [eso.ochrance.cz](https://www.eso.ochrance.cz).

Methodology

— The survey “Good practice in the provision of housing to vulnerable people” consists of two parts. We first conducted a secondary analysis and then followed this up with qualitative research focusing directly on organisations that help vulnerable people to obtain housing.

As part of the secondary analysis, we collected data on how people from vulnerable groups managed to obtain and retain housing. We also paid attention to the consequences of housing need, not only with regard to the people directly affected by the need, but also in terms of society as a whole. We drew on available sources focusing on the situation in the Czech Republic. Where some data were missing or where it was appropriate to supplement them, we also used important foreign sources.

The follow-up qualitative research is based on open coding of the testimonies given by the survey participants, i.e. the staff of the helping organisations. Open coding is one of the basic methods of qualitative research. Its substance lies in data analysis. Interviews with participants were first transcribed into text. We then divided the text into smaller units – separate sentences or fragments of conversations. These smaller units were coded based on the topic relevant to our survey (for example, “participation”, “neighbourhood relations” and “rent levels”). We then combined units marked with the same codes in thematically related groups, and interpreted the thus-arranged data.⁴⁰

The characteristics of the organisations we included in the survey and the method of their selection are described in more detail in the introduction to the chapter “Good practice in the provision of housing to vulnerable people (results of qualitative research)”.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Corbin, Juliet and Strauss, Anselm. *Základy kvalitativního výzkumu. (Basics of Qualitative Research.)* Albert 1999.

Availability of housing for vulnerable groups protected by the Anti-Discrimination Act (secondary analysis)

While we know from the complaints addressed to the Public Defender of Rights that some people face discrimination in their search for housing, these complaints do not provide a full picture of the availability of housing for people protected by the prohibition of discrimination. This is, on the one hand, because only a small proportion of those who experience discrimination report it to the Defender or any other institution.⁴¹ On the other hand, discrimination itself may be only one of the causes of housing need; related problems, such as lack of suitable flats or low income, can also play a role in this regard.

The aim of this chapter is therefore to provide an insight into the current situation in housing availability for selected groups of people named in the Anti-Discrimination Act and to illustrate the extent to which they face discrimination in housing. Of all the groups protected by the prohibition of discrimination, we focused on those who – according to our findings – are most at risk of housing need. Specifically, these vulnerable groups are:

- » members of a minority ethnicity, race or nationality (in the sense of ethnic origin – in Czech: “národnost”), and foreigners;
- » people with disabilities;
- » the elderly;
- » people discriminated against on the basis of sex or parenthood.

5. Members of minority ethnicity, race or nationality (in the sense of ethnic origin), foreigners

Roma people, in particular, experience significant obstacles in access to housing. According to a 2022 survey conducted by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, 55% of Roma people living in the Czech Republic

⁴¹ Survey report of the Public Defender of Rights “Discrimination in the Czech Republic: victims of discrimination and obstacles hindering their access to justice” of 27 February 2015, File No. 46/2014/DIS, [eso.ochrance.cz](https://www.eso.ochrance.cz), p. 132.

experienced **discrimination** in the area of housing over the last five years⁴². An even slightly worse result came from a survey of the Research Institute for Labour and Social Affairs⁴³. According to their findings, housing is the most common area where discrimination is perceived by Roma people over the age of 16. Discrimination was experienced by 59.8% of those respondents who had sought housing in the last 12 months. The specific forms of the landlords' discriminatory approach are illustrated, for example, by an experimental survey conducted by Charles University in 2016. The researchers responded to advertisements with rental offers using names and surnames that people usually associate with Roma and Vietnamese minorities. Compared to unmarked (Czech majority) names, the researchers posing as minorities were about 50% less likely to be invited to a viewing⁴⁴. In addition to discrimination, a problem also lies in the high cost of housing, as Roma people make up a large proportion of **low-income households**.⁴⁵

The low accessibility of usual forms of housing frequently leads Roma people to resort to substandard options and they often become victims of the "poverty industry".⁴⁶ This is one of the reasons why the Roma commonly live in socially excluded localities. The "Gabal Report" of 2015 states that in 2014, the inhabitants of these places were 75% Roma.⁴⁷ According to some findings, the spatial segregation of Roma people is not only a matter of the distant past; this phenomenon has recently been observed, for example, in the conduct of a corporation renting flats in the Moravian-Silesian Region⁴⁸ and in the discriminatory allocation of certain municipal flats⁴⁹. Discrimination in the allocation of municipal housing can also occur indirectly, for example by favouring families with fewer children.⁵⁰

Compared to the majority population, Roma people more often live in **substandard conditions**. The most frequent problem is inadequate space per household member. In 2021, 83% of the Roma in the Czech Republic lived in overcrowded⁵¹ flats (compared to the majority population, where only 15% lived in such conditions in 2020)⁵². Detailed data from 2016 show that compared to the general population, the Roma are also much

42 FRA. Roma in 10 European Countries. Main results. Roma Survey 2021. Online, PDF. FRA 2022. Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2022-roma-survey-2021-main-results_en.pdf [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

43 Fónadová, Laura et al. Výsledky výběrového šetření romské populace – vyhodnocení indikátorů. (Results of the Roma Population Sample Survey – Evaluation of Indicators.) Online, PDF. RILSA, 2022, p. 63. Available (in Czech) at: <https://esd.rilsa.cz/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/RILSA-Vysledky-vyberoveho-setreni-romske-populace.pdf> [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

44 Bartoš, Vojtěch et al. Attention Discrimination: Theory and Field Experiments with Monitoring Information Acquisition. Online. American Economic Review. 106 (6), 2016, p. 18. American Economic Association. Available at: <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/aer.20140571> [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

45 Government of the Czech Republic. Strategie rovnosti, začlenění a participace Romů (Strategie romské integrace) 2021–2030. (Roma Equality, Inclusion and Participation Strategy (Roma Integration Strategy 2021–2030.) Online, PDF. Government of the Czech Republic, 2021, p. 57. [retrieved on: 24 August 2023]. Available (in Czech) at: https://www.vlada.cz/assets/ppov/zalezitosti-romske-komunity/aktuality/Strategie-rovnosti--zacleneni-a-participace-Romu-2021---2030---textova-cast_OK_2.pdf [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

46 This is defined as "the exploitation of the situation of residents who are disadvantaged in the mainstream housing market and thus cannot but agree to pay rents and housing fees at levels that do not reflect their quality and form". (Toušek, Ladislav et al. Labyrintem zločinu a chudoby. Kriminalita a viktimizace v sociálně vyloučené lokalitě (In the Labyrinth of Crime and Poverty. Criminality and Victimization in a Socially Excluded Locality). , Doplněk publishing house, 2018, p. 42.)

47 Čada, Karel. et al. Analýza sociálně vyloučených lokalit v ČR. (Analysis of Socially Excluded Localities in the Czech Republic.) Online, PDF. Ministry for Regional Development. 2015. Available at: <https://irop.gov.cz>. [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

48 Černá, Eliška and Khazalová, Gaby. Ostravský byznys se sociálním bydlením: Romové smí jen do vyloučených lokalit. (Ostrava's Social Housing Business: Roma Only Allowed in Excluded Localities.) Online. Deník Referendum. 24 November 2021. Deník Referendum. Available (in Czech) at: <https://denikreferendum.cz/clanek/33376-ostravsky-byznys-se-socialnim-bydlenim-romove-smi-jen-do-vyloucenyh-lokalit> [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

49 Report of the Public Defender of Rights on a case where discrimination was found of 15 April 2015, File No. 107/2013/DIS, [eso.ochrance.cz](https://ochrance.cz).

50 Government of the Czech Republic. Strategie rovnosti, začlenění a participace Romů (Strategie romské integrace) 2021–2030. (Roma Equality, Inclusion and Participation Strategy (Roma Integration Strategy 2021–2030.) Online, PDF. Government of the Czech Republic, 2021, p. 57. [retrieved on: 24 August 2023]. Available (in Czech) at: https://www.vlada.cz/assets/ppov/zalezitosti-romske-komunity/aktuality/Strategie-rovnosti--zacleneni-a-participace-Romu-2021---2030---textova-cast_OK_2.pdf [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

51 The Eurostat definition of overcrowding is used in this regard: A person is considered to be living in an overcrowded household if the household does not have at its disposal a minimum number of rooms equal to: one room per couple in the household; one room for each single person aged 18 or more; one room per pair of single people of the same gender between 12 and 17 years of age; one room for each single person between 12 and 17 years of age and not included in the previous category; one room per pair of children under 12 years of age. Eurostat. Glossary: Overcrowding rate. Online 13 April 2021. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Overcrowding_rate [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

52 FRA. Roma in 10 European Countries. Main results. Roma Survey 2021. Online, PDF. FRA 2022. Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2022-roma-survey-2021-main-results2_en.pdf [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

more likely to live in dwellings without indoor toilets and showers/bathrooms (4% v. 0.2%) and in dwellings with defects (leaking roofs, damp walls or foundations, rot in window frames and floors; 21% v. 9.2%). More often than not, the immediate vicinity of their dwellings is also problematic. A total of 41% of Roma live in areas suffering from pollution or other environmental impairments (compared to 21% of households in the general population)⁵³.

Foreigners also face problems when looking for housing. A total of 1,116,154 foreign nationals were registered in the Czech Republic at the end of 2022.⁵⁴ According to a survey conducted by the Public Defender of Rights in 2021, many real estate agencies, as well as private landlords, would not respond to inquiries made in a foreign language or would openly state that they did not offer their services to foreigners. The situation can often be resolved only via a Czech intermediary who arranges housing with landlords in Czech and may even have to “put a good word” for the foreigners.⁵⁵ Rented housing is the most common type of accommodation for foreigners – for example, most Prague-based foreigners from countries outside the European Union live in rental flats or houses.⁵⁶ A higher proportion of foreigners living in their own property or property owned by their close relatives can only be observed among the Vietnamese and Russian minorities⁵⁷. General data on the degree of discrimination against foreigners with regard to accessibility of housing are not available for the Czech Republic. However, cases have been encountered in the Defender’s work where foreigners were rejected as applicants for housing both on the private housing market and by municipalities.⁵⁸ EU surveys show that 7% of foreigners experienced discrimination in this area in the past year and the same is true of 23% of people with an immigration background over the last 5 years.⁵⁹

A specific situation is that of war refugees from Ukraine, who now make up more than half of all the foreigners registered in the Czech Republic.⁶⁰ People from Ukraine, whose number has increased in the Czech Republic several times since the Russian aggression began in February 2022, face many difficulties accessing housing. According to a survey conducted by PAQ Research, 29% of Ukrainian refugees have experienced discrimination in their search for housing⁶¹. As of June 2023, 49% of refugees from Ukraine were living in rented accommodation in the Czech Republic, and 20% of this number were staying at temporary accommodation facilities (hotels, hostels), while the remaining share of newcomers were living in flats provided by or shared with Czech or Ukrainian households.⁶² Almost a quarter (23%) of the surveyed households had housing secured for only a few months. Only about one third of the households had long-term housing.⁶³ Changes in access to housing were introduced by an amendment to the “Lex Ukraine” in July 2023. Since then, free accommodation has been provided by the government beyond the set maximum period of time only to vulnerable persons who have been granted a humanitarian benefit.⁶⁴ However, it is clear from the available data that the number of

53 FRA. EU-MIDIS II. Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey. Main Results. Online, PDF. FRA 2017. Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2017-eu-midis-ii-main-results_en.pdf [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

54 Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic. Čtvrtletní zpráva o migraci IV/2022. (Quarterly report on migration IV/2022.) Online, PDF. Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic 2023. Available (in Czech) at: <https://www.mvcr.cz/clanek/ctvrtletni-zprava-o-migraci-za-iv-ctvrtleti-2022.aspx> [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

55 Survey report “Citizens of the European Union in the Czech Republic” of 12 November 2021, File No. 72/2020/DIS, [eso.ochrance.cz](https://www.eso.ochrance.cz).

56 Leontiyeva, Yana, Mikešová, Renáta, Tollarová, Blanka. Pražané s cizím pasem. Výsledky výzkumů cizinců a cizinek ze zemí mimo EU žijících v české metropoli. (Prague Residents with Foreign Passports. Results of Research on Foreigners from Non-EU Countries Living in the Czech Capital.) Online, PDF. Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences 2018, p. 31. Available (in Czech) at: https://www.soc.cas.cz/sites/default/files/publikace/leontiyeva-mikesova-tollarova-prazane_s_cizim_pasem-vysledky_vyzkumu_cizincu_a_cizinek_ze_zemi_mimo_eu_zijicich_v_ceske_metropoli_0.pdf [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

57 Ibid.

58 Report on a case where discrimination was found of 1 September 2015, File No. 172/2013/DIS, [eso.ochrance.cz](https://www.eso.ochrance.cz), Report on a case where discrimination was found of 28 February 2017, File No. 3893/2015/VOP, [eso.ochrance.cz](https://www.eso.ochrance.cz).

59 FRA. EU-MIDIS II. Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey. Main Results. Online, PDF. FRA 2017. Available at: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2017-eu-midis-ii-main-results_en.pdf [retrieved on 2023-08-24].

60 Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic. Čtvrtletní zpráva o migraci IV/2022. (Quarterly report on migration IV/2022.) Online, PDF. Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic 2023. Available (in Czech) at: <https://www.mvcr.cz/clanek/ctvrtletni-zprava-o-migraci-za-iv-ctvrtleti-2022.aspx> [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

61 PAQ Research. Integrace uprchlíků na trhu práce a v bydlení. (Refugee Integration in the Labour Market and Housing.) Online, PDF. PAQ Research 2023. Available (in Czech) at: https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/system/files/2023-10/PAQ_UA_Prace_bydleni_8_2023.pdf [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

64 Section 6b (3) of Act No. 65/2022 Coll., on certain measures in connection with the armed conflict in the territory of Ukraine caused by

refugees living free of charge had already dropped significantly before the amendment was adopted⁶⁵. The PAQ Research survey shows that refugees who have managed to obtain housing in a standard flat (whether in the form of shared or independent accommodation) are more successfully integrated into society – they speak Czech better and their children are more likely to attend Czech schools.⁶⁶

6. People with disabilities

People with disabilities must be viewed as a diverse group of people with various types of limitations (physical, sensory, mental, psychosocial, etc.). Their specific housing requirements or barriers to finding housing depend on the type and degree of disability, and their individual needs. Obtaining suitable housing is a major problem for these people, often exacerbated by discrimination from the wider community (landlords, including municipal authorities, neighbours and others). A survey conducted by the Czech National Disability Council in 2012 shows that around 7% of people with disabilities have experienced treatment which they perceived as discrimination.⁶⁷ Another obstacle is the fact that people with disabilities are more likely than the general population to be disproportionately burdened by housing costs (i.e. spending more than 40% of their income on these costs).⁶⁸

People with reduced mobility or those who use wheelchairs have special requirements on flats, especially in terms of their layout and design (in particular, low thresholds, accessibility of controls such as switches and circuit breakers, handrails on sanitary facilities, ramps at entrances). However, the availability of such flats is very limited.

Another way to obtain barrier-free housing is to use municipal barrier-free flats, but their number is again insufficient. A total of 77.4% of municipalities with municipal flats do not offer barrier-free flats at all.⁶⁹ Even if a municipality does have such flats available, the waiting period is usually several years.⁷⁰

The situation is different for people with mental illness or intellectual disabilities. In contrast to people with physical or sensory limitations, their health problems are compounded by stigmatisation in the general population. Prejudices in Czech society against people with mental illness are still very strong and improvements have only been marginal, despite many destigmatisation campaigns. To illustrate, the results of a 2016 survey showed that 7% of the Czech population would not want their neighbour to have a physical disability, while 68% of Czechs would be bothered by a person with a mental illness.⁷¹

the invasion of the forces of the Russian Federation, in conjunction with Section 6b of Act No. 66/2022 Coll., on measures in the area of employment and the area of social security in connection with the armed conflict in the territory of Ukraine caused by the invasion of the forces of the Russian Federation, in the version effective as of 1 November 2023.

65 PAQ Research. Integrace uprchlíků na trhu práce a v bydlení. (Refugee Integration in the Labour Market and Housing.) Online, PDF. PAQ Research 2023. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/system/files/2023-10/PAQ_UA_Prace_bydleni_8_2023.pdf [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

66 PAQ Research. Hlas Ukrajinců: zkušenosti s bydlením v Česku a výhled do budoucna. (The Voice of Ukrainians: Experience with Housing in the Czech Republic and the Outlook for the Future.) Online, PDF. PAQ Research 2023, p. 3. Available (in Czech) at: <https://www.paqresearch.cz/post/uprchlici-posun-jazyk-prace-bydleni> [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

67 Krhutová, Lenka and Sochor, Tomáš. Projevy a formy diskriminace osob se zdravotním postižením. (Manifestations and Forms of Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities.) Online, PDF. Czech National Disability Council, 2012. Available (in Czech) at: https://nrzp.cz/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/images_docs_PROGRESS_Vystupy_Vysledky-dotaznikoveho-setreni_3.pdf [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

68 Plouin, Marissa et al. A Crisis on the Horizon: Ensuring Affordable, Accessible Housing for People with Disabilities. Online. Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers. No. 261 [pdf document]. OECD 2021, p. 22. Available at: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/a-crisis-on-the-horizon_306e6993-en [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

69 Foldynová, Ivana. et al. Analýza struktury obecních bytů v ČR. (Analysis of the Structure of Municipal Housing in the Czech Republic.) Online, PDF. MoLSA 2016. Available (in Czech) at: https://www.mpsv.cz/documents/20142/225517/Analiza_struktury_obecnich_bytu_v_CR_TB05MPSV008.pdf/dd93c749-28a4-78f1-a976-7aa939fdbe5c [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

70 In Prague, for example, the average waiting time for a barrier-free municipal flat is around two years. However, there are major differences in this regard. In the case of barrier-free flats at more attractive addresses (e.g. with better accessible care services), waiting times can be as long as 6–8 years, while for less popular addresses (for example, the district of Černý Most in Prague), they can be shorter than a year (a qualified estimate made by employees of Asistence, o. p. s., Tereza Klossovská and Michaela Táborská, personal communication of 30 March 2023).

71 Pasz, Jiří et al. Destigmatizační manuál. (A Destigmatisation Manual) Online, PDF. Narovinu.net 2018. Available (in Czech) at: <https://narovinu.net/materialy/> [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

The exclusion of people with limited legal capacity from access to municipal housing is also a major problem. The requirement for full legal capacity as a condition for obtaining municipal housing is a common form of discrimination on the grounds of psychosocial or mental disability (which is a reason for the restriction of legal capacity).⁷²

Many people with mental illness find it difficult to function socially. It may be difficult for them to achieve the necessary level of education, find and keep a job, or establish meaningful relationships. As a result, they often remain on the margins of society, without the necessary financial resources, and they frequently receive only minimal disability pensions. They are thus forced to survive on the minimum subsistence level⁷³. These problems may eventually culminate in a loss of housing or difficulty in accessing it. The high proportion of people with mental illness or generally poor mental health among the homeless (or in other forms of housing need) has already been reported by several sources.⁷⁴ At the same time, housing need or even homelessness is a cause of stress in itself. Homeless people do not have the feeling of security that is common in the private space of the home; they are often victims of violence and adapt their behaviour to the new environment of the “street”, which negatively affects the human psyche in the long run.⁷⁵ Thus, poor mental health need not only be a cause, but also a consequence of housing need.

7. Senior citizens

Senior citizens face a number of problems in the area of housing. They often live in dwellings that are inadequate for these people in view of their deteriorating **health** and current needs – these aspects are discussed in more detail in the previous chapter concerning the situation of people with disabilities.

Another challenge is the **unaffordability** of adequate housing, which is becoming an increasingly urgent problem. The Housing Exclusion Report for 2021 shows that a growing number of senior citizens face housing need, and that they often find themselves in this situation in old age (at least a third of people over 60 encountered housing need only once they passed the age of 60⁷⁶). Elderly households represent up to one fifth of all the households living in accommodation facilities in the long term.⁷⁷ However, senior citizens living in regular housing also face certain problems. A significant proportion of elderly households are burdened by excessive housing costs (i.e. spend more than 40% of their income on housing). This is true of 110,000 to 150,000 households, three quarters of which are households of single female seniors.⁷⁸ Indeed, women aged 65+ face significantly higher rates of income poverty than men, which owes to differences in average working-age incomes and dropouts from the labour market during periods when they cared for their relatives.⁷⁹

72 Survey report of the Public Defender of Rights “Municipal housing through the prism of the right to equal treatment and the role of municipalities in addressing housing need” of 18 February 2020, File No. 69/2019/DIS, [eso.ochrance.cz](https://www.eso.ochrance.cz).

73 Horáková, Jana. Problematika bydlení. Podpora změny paradigmatu péče o duševní zdraví. (Housing Issues: Supporting a Paradigm Shift in Mental Health Care.) Online, PDF. Fokus Czech Republic, 2017. Available (in Czech) at: http://www.fokus-cr.cz/images/Brozura_Problematika_bydleni.pdf.

74 For example, Dutka, Jakub et al. 2018: Zdraví obyvatel postrádajících standardní bydlení. (Health of People Lacking Standard Housing.) Online, PDF. MoLSA 2018. Available (in Czech) at: https://socialnibydeni.mpsv.cz/download/dokumenty/55-zdravi_obyvatel_postradajicich_standardni_bydleni.pdf [retrieved on: 2023-08-24], or Bäuml, Josef et al. Die SEEWOLF – Studie (Seelische Erkrankungsrate in den Einrichtungen der Wohnungslosenhilfe im Großraum München). Online, PDF. Sozialreferat, Landeshauptstadt München 2018. Available at: <https://risi.muenchen.de/risi/dokument/v/5203084> [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

75 Dutka, Jakub et al. 2018: Zdraví obyvatel postrádajících standardní bydlení. (Health of Residents Lacking Standard Housing.) Online, PDF. MoLSA 2018. Available (in Czech) at: https://socialnibydeni.mpsv.cz/download/dokumenty/55-zdravi_obyvatel_postradajicich_standardni_bydleni.pdf [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

76 Klusáček, Jan et al. Bydlení jako problém. Zpráva o vyloučení z bydlení 2021. (Housing as a Problem. Housing Exclusion Report 2021.) Online, PDF. Social Housing Platform 2021, p. 31. Available (in Czech) at: <https://socialnibydeni.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Bydleni-jako-problem-2021.pdf> [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

77 Ibid, p. 30.

78 Ibid, p. 33.

79 Office of the Government of the Czech Republic. Strategie rovnosti žen a mužů na léta 2021–2030 (Strategy for Gender Equality for 2021–2030). Online. February 2021. Available (in Czech) at: https://www.vlada.cz/assets/ppov/rovne-prilezitosti-zen-a-muzu/Aktuality/Strategie_rovnosti_zen_a_mužu.pdf. [retrieved on: 2023-11-13].

The group of independently living senior citizens has been steadily increasing, with the number of such households more than doubling between 2005 and 2014⁸⁰. A specific feature of elderly households is that only a small proportion of them receive a housing allowance, specifically 20–25% of the approximately 130,000 to 150,000 elderly households that would qualify for the allowance. The authors of the Housing Exclusion Report explain this by the fact that senior citizens are likely not to apply for the allowance either because of a lack of information or because they would be ashamed to do so.⁸¹

A certain positive factor affecting senior citizens' housing situation is that 80% of them live in their own property and only 14% in rented housing (compared to the working-age population, where 74% of the population have own housing and 23% live in rented properties).⁸² Owning a home, which senior citizens typically acquired during their working lives, is associated with lower housing costs compared to rentals.

8. People discriminated against on the basis of parenthood

Where reference is made to discrimination in access to housing on the basis of sex, this means primarily discrimination on the grounds of parenthood. The issue may manifest itself especially as difficulties in accessing housing for single mothers or fathers. This group is seen as the one most affected by housing need, for example, by the representatives of municipalities.⁸³ However, the situation can be similarly unfavourable for families with multiple children. The housing need experienced by single parents and also families with three or more children often has a negative impact on the lives of the parents and their children.

According to the results of a survey concerned with quantification of the housing problem in the Czech population, which was carried out between 2020 and 2021, housing need affects 35,000 to 62,000 households, with approximately 20,000 to 50,000 children. A further 130,000 to 190,000 households with approximately 100,000 children are at risk of losing their homes⁸⁴. Despite some efforts to help families with children in housing need, such as priority housing programmes, family settling-in assistance and intensive accompanying social work, many families with children in housing need still remain in residential hostels and shelters. However, shelters are often not suitable for whole families and the path from there to standard housing is becoming increasingly difficult.⁸⁵

9. Consequences of a housing disadvantage

People disadvantaged on the housing market face housing need, which negatively affects the quality of their lives in many ways. The impacts on health and family life are particularly significant.

80 Godarová, Jana et al. Dostupnost bydlení a stávající bytová situace seniorů 2017. (Housing Availability and Current Housing Situation of Senior Citizens in 2017) Online, PDF. Research Institute for Labour and Social Affairs 2017, p. 108. Available (in Czech) at: <https://www.mpsv.cz/web/cz/analyzy-a-vyzkumy> [retrieved on: 18 October 2023].

81 Klusáček, Jan et al. Bydlení jako problém. Zpráva o vyloučení z bydlení 2021. (Housing as a Problem: Housing Exclusion Report 2021) Online, PDF. Social Housing Platform 2021, p. 33. Available (in Czech) at: <https://socialnibydeni.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Bydleni-jako-problem-2021.pdf> [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

82 Godarová, Jana et al. Dostupnost bydlení a stávající bytová situace seniorů 2017. (Housing Availability and Current Housing Situation of Senior Citizens in 2017) Online, PDF. Research Institute for Labour and Social Affairs 2017, p. 122, tab. 8. Available (in Czech) at: <https://www.mpsv.cz/web/cz/analyzy-a-vyzkumy> [retrieved on: 18 October 2023].

83 Survey report of the Public Defender of Rights "Municipal housing through the prism of the right to equal treatment and the role of municipalities in addressing housing need" of 18 February 2020, File No. 69/2019/DIS, [eso.ochrance.cz](https://www.eso.ochrance.cz).

84 Klusáček, Jan et al. Sociální bydlení v České republice. Zpráva pro Zastoupení Evropské komise v ČR. (Social Housing in the Czech Republic. Report for the Representation of the European Commission in the Czech Republic.) Online, PDF. Social Housing Platform, 2021, p. 6. Available (in Czech) at: https://socialnibydeni.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Socialni-bydleni-v-CR_final-6.pdf [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

85 A year later, she has to go. The dream of a flat is becoming more and more distant for mothers in trouble. www.seznamzpravy.cz [online]. Prague: Seznam Zprávy, a.s., 2023. Available (in Czech) at: <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-zivot-v-cesku-matky-s-detmi-kocuji-po-azylovych-domech-najit-byt-je-cim-dal-tezsi-239015> [retrieved on: 2023-11-09].

A 2018 report drawn up by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs focuses on the medical condition of people in housing need.⁸⁶ People “without a roof over their heads”, i.e. living on the streets, are among the most vulnerable groups. Being homeless, it is much harder to maintain a healthy lifestyle and to meet the basic needs of life (including food and fluid intake); people lack adequate shelter from the elements and access to sanitation. Combined with risky behaviour, these situations are also associated with a higher incidence of infectious diseases and injuries. Last but not least, homeless people are exposed to chronic stress, they lack the sense of security that is common in the private space of the home, and they are also frequent victims of violence.⁸⁷

The 2018 report on the pilot testing of rapid rehousing for families⁸⁸ shows that people in housing need face the following health risks at increased rates:

- » serious mental illness (4.5 times more likely for people in housing need caring for children, compared to those who have a stable home);
- » 2 times more frequent use of emergency services (compared to people who have a stable home);
- » 4.5 times more frequent ambulance use (compared to people who have a stable home);
- » 3.1 times higher risk of hospitalisation;
- » 2 times more frequent use of antibiotics.

Along with health risks, housing need also carries undesirable impacts on family life, especially on childcare.⁸⁹ Compared to families who have a stable home, they are primarily at risk of:

- » 2.7 times higher risk of substitute family care;
- » 12% fewer families use help in childcare problems;
- » 16% fewer children can sleep as much as they need.

However, the impact of inadequate housing on children can also be less obvious. For example, an analysis by Median⁹⁰ showed a strong correlation between housing need and the following phenomena:

- » the child’s problems with peers;
- » academic and disciplinary problems at school;
- » bullying.

A survey concerned with the mortality rates among homeless people in the UK brings to light further negative impacts on the lives of people in housing crisis:

- » about 30 years lower life expectancy;

86 Dutka, Jakub et al. Zdraví obyvatel postrádajících standardní bydlení. (Health of People Lacking Standard Housing.). Online, PDF. MoLSA 2018. Available (in Czech) at: https://socialnibydeni.mpsv.cz/download/dokumenty/55-zdravi_obyvatel_postradajicich_standardni_bydleni.pdf [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

87 Ibid, p. 3.

88 Ripka, Štěpán et al. Pilotní testování rychlého zabydlení rodin s dětmi. (Pilot Testing of Rapid Rehousing for Families with Children.) Online, PDF. Ostrava University 2018. Available (in Czech) at: <https://dokumenty.osu.cz/fss/publikace/prubezna-zprava2-zabydleni-rodin.pdf> [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

89 Ibid.

90 Median. Analýza nedostačujícího bydlení na školní a další problémy dětí v ČR. (Analysis of Inadequate Housing for Children’s Schooling and Other Problems in the Czech Republic.) Online, PDF. Median 2017. Available at: https://socialnibydeni.mpsv.cz/download/dokumenty/20-dopady_nevyhovujicoho_bydleni_na_deti.pdf [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

- » approximately 9 times higher risk of suicide;
- » 3 times higher risk of death due to a traffic accident than for the general population.⁹¹

However, the above consequences of housing need are not “only” problems of the people experiencing it, but also affect society as a whole. They are reflected in various areas and bring negative impacts such as a burden on the healthcare and social systems, an increase in social pathologies and, last but not least, a negative impact on public budgets. All the above are consequences that have implications for the part of society not directly affected by housing need.

While the burden on the healthcare and social systems owing to a significant proportion of the population living in substandard conditions may not be immediately felt by society as a whole, this may be different for other phenomena. For example, the relatively frequent recidivism among persons who have returned from prison is a society-wide problem. One of the proven causes of recidivism is (among other things) the lack of permanent housing.⁹² The impact of housing need on children is also a pressing issue. Housing need is not only a problem compromising their healthy physical and mental development, but society as a whole loses out on the skills and talents that these children will not be able to develop properly. Last but not least, housing need affects negatively the State budget. According to a survey conducted by the Czech Priorities organisation⁹³, the average cost to public budgets of the housing crisis is CZK 20,000 per person in housing need per year, and approximately CZK 50,000 per average household in housing need per year. The societal costs associated with housing need range from CZK 58,500 per person and year (in the case of people in lighter forms of housing need, such as need felt by people living in flats) to CZK 156,000 per person and year in the case of homeless people. At the current scale of housing need, the annual societal cost is almost CZK 11 billion.⁹⁴

91 Crisis. Homelessness: A silent killer. A research briefing on mortality amongst homeless people. Online, PDF. Crisis 2011. Available at: https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/237321/crisis_homelessness_a_silent_killer_2011.pdf [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

92 Database of Strategic Documents of the Czech Republic. Konceptce vězeňství do roku 2025 (Prison System Strategy until 2025.) Online, PDF. Prison Service of the Czech Republic, 2016, p. 120. Available (in Czech) at: <https://www.vscr.cz/media/organizacni-jednotky/generalni-reditelstvi/ostatni/koncepce-vezenstvi.pdf> [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

93 Zapletalová, Lucie et al. Vyhodnocení nákladů vyvolaných bytovou nouzí a logický rámec jejího systémového řešení. (Evaluation of the Costs of Housing Distress and the Logical Framework for its Systemic Solution.) Online, PDF. Czech Priorities, 2021. Available (in Czech) at: <https://www.ceskepriority.cz/vystupy> [retrieved on: 2023-08-24].

94 Ibid.

Good practice in the provision of housing to vulnerable people (results of qualitative research)

This part of the report summarises the results of the survey itself. It consists of several chapters that deal with good practice in the provision of housing, from the establishment of helping organisations and their settling-in activities to working with clients and obtaining housing, to the various principles of settling-in. Further chapters also focus on funding and the barriers faced by organisations supporting settling-in activities. The final chapter deals with evaluation systems for settling-in projects.

We tried to include in the survey a diverse selection of helping entities so as to cover various regions of the Czech Republic, various target groups, and also various approaches. The aim was not to evaluate the work of organisations or to put ourselves in the role of an arbitrator to determine which approaches are better than others. Rather, we wanted to establish, across a range of approaches, what helps organisations to achieve their goals of alleviating housing need. We investigated what practices worked well in terms of settling-in of vulnerable people and what was a prerequisite for the success of the selected projects.

Tab. 1 List of survey participants

Organisation name	Services provided	Territorial scope	Target group
Asistence, o.p.s. (Assistance)	Social rehabilitation service, assistance with finding barrier-free housing and provision of housing for people with disabilities	Prague	People with physical or combined disabilities
Community Work Centre in Western Bohemia	More than Just Housing project – real estate services for landlords who do not want to discriminate	Plzeň Region	People at risk of social exclusion, Roma
Domov sv. Anežky, o.p.s. (St. Agnes Home)	Social rehabilitation and independent living support service	South Bohemian Region	People with disabilities

Fond dostupného bydlení, z. ú. (Affordable Housing Fund)	Purchase of flats and renting them to the socially vulnerable	Ústí nad Labem Region (in particular)	Generally vulnerable groups of population
Diocesan Charity of Ostrava-Opava	Village of Coexistence – a model of coexistence between the Roma and non-Roma	Moravian-Silesian Region	The Roma, generally vulnerable groups of population
Jako doma – Homelike, o.p.s.	A field programme focusing on settling-in support for women and transgender people in flats	Prague	Women and transgender people
Municipal Rental Agency (an organisation of the Prague Social Services Centre)	A service for homeowners and people in housing need, designed to provide affordable housing	Prague	Generally vulnerable groups of population
Organizace pro pomoc uprchlíkům, z.s. (Refugee Aid Organisation)	Halfway House service	Prague	Young foreigners aged 18–26 without family support
Práh jižní Morava, z.ú. (Práh Southern Moravia)	Sheltered housing, social rehabilitation	South Moravian Region	People with experience of mental illness
RENADI, o.p.s.	Aftercare flats	Brno	People at risk of addiction
R-Mosty, z.s.	Fair Housing project – real estate services for landlords and people in need, housing mediation	Prague	The Roma, generally vulnerable groups of population
Romodrom, o.p.s.	Services aimed at obtaining and maintaining standard housing	Moravian-Silesian Region, Písek, other regions of the Czech Republic	The Roma, generally vulnerable groups of population
Vavřínek, z. s.	Housing First for families with children, support in obtaining and maintaining standard housing	Louny region	Families with children in housing need
ZAHRADA 2000, z. s. (Garden 2000)	Social rehabilitation service and support in obtaining and maintaining housing	Jeseník region	People with experience of mental illness

10. Reasons for the formation of organisations and their settling-in activities

The nature of an organisation, its focus and its approach to addressing housing need are usually based on why and how the activity came about. In a number of cases, the survey participants agreed that, at the outset, there was a desire to overcome systemic barriers. Based on their years of work, some participants concluded that efforts to help people in need had limited success if housing was not available. The projects then emerged as a logical and necessary complement to the existing services offered, as the people involved found that suitable housing had to be provided in order to help the clients. And because the State would not provide such housing, the organisations started to deal with the problem themselves.

“Only when they have a place to live – and I think this is the most basic human need – can they begin solving their other problems. In all my years working in the field, I’ve never seen any success in getting people get out of debt and helping them find a job when they were still living on the street. Few people want to deal with ‘advanced’ things like relationships, work or debts if they don’t have a home.”

Romodrom

“We know we can’t do it without standard housing. All these fantasies about greater integration, assimilation, activation or whatever will never work unless you first meet the basic biological and psychosocial need to have a home.”

R-Mosty

Some of the projects also arose from a difficult personal situation of the founders.

“One of our founders has a child with a disability, and he was afraid – back in the communist era – that the child would end up in an institution somewhere, in a mental hospital or something like that, once he died.”

St. Agnes Home

Some of the organisations started to provide assistance in settling-in, along with their existing activities, because of motivation “from above”, i.e. following a decision of the local government, which had resolved to improve the housing situation in the region with the help of these organisations.

“We were approached by the city hall, which was building a complementary network at the time with a view to supporting social curators operating in city districts, whose agenda this should be – to support people who manage to get out of some ... either from the street or from some form of provisional housing, whether it was a shelter, hostel or some kind of sheltered housing, and so on, into their own social housing.”

Jako Doma – Homelike

11. Staff structure at the organisations and staff members’ professional focus

One of the key conditions for good practice has proven to be **qualified, stable** and **motivated** staff.

In terms of qualifications, there is a diverse range of job roles in the organisations that took part in the survey. Some staff members are inhouse workers and form the core of the organisation, while others provide their services externally or are employed on a part-time or temporary basis, depending on the needs and

capabilities of the helping organisations. The team typically includes social workers, housing (real estate) specialists, facility managers, legal and financial advisors, peer workers, and volunteers. Less frequently, we encountered separate specialised positions such as project manager, payment (rent) administrator, locksmith and PR officer. These areas were generally taken care of by staff working primarily in other job positions. Many of the organisations also employ specialists with regard to the specific needs of their respective target group (nurse, psychologist, addictionologist, intercultural worker, occupational therapist).

A position that deserves special attention is that of a housing specialist (also referred to by some participants as a real estate specialist). This position need not be filled by a qualified social worker. The person should ideally have experience in the real estate market and their task is primarily to look for flats, prepare contracts, and accompany clients on flat viewings. One survey participant described this position as follows:

“(...) there was a housing specialist there who followed the market situation and negotiated with the real estate agencies to keep track of the current market supply. When a client was leaving a psychiatric hospital, he was able to step in with some extra knowledge of the current offer and price maps, and so on. (...) He had a high school and was able to understand all this. This was actually a woman who just had some experience with a real estate agency. And she knew how things worked, she knew the rules about security deposits and how much cheaper flats were in Javorník than in Jeseník (...)”

Garden 2000

Although clients usually need both housing and support from social workers to successfully settle in, it is usually best to **keep these two areas (real estate agency and social work) strictly separate** in practice. Many participants pointed to the dangerous conflict of roles that could arise if they tried to act in the best interests of the client while simultaneously overseeing rent payments or collecting rent directly from clients. Some of the organisations initially advocated a model of providing both types of services at the same time, but later abandoned this model because of the bad experience they had gained. Others have advocated the separation of the real estate and social aspects from the beginning:

“The trend today is that, as part of the Housing First model, a lot of social service providers have been manoeuvred into a position where they manage the housing stock and provide social services in the given flats at the same time. We believe, and experience from abroad supports our opinion, that this is not a good way to go. This approach undermines the core principle of social work. It is not possible for one worker or one office to deal with a client’s life situation and be very intimate with their personal affairs, while charging them for rent. We know from experience that this undermines trust between the client and the social worker. So the way we’ve set this up in Plzeň is as two separate organisations and we’re trying to promote the idea that the social real estate service or social real estate agency should be a separate entity.”

Community Work Centre in Western Bohemia

A social worker is bound by the ethical principles of social work. The relationship with the client is based on mutual trust. The social worker should act in the client’s interest, but respect their wishes and needs, not judge them. The client should not be afraid to tell the social worker anything. The social worker should also act as an advocate for the client.⁹⁵ Last but not least, the social worker is bound to maintain confidentiality and should not disclose anything about the client without the client’s consent.⁹⁶ These principles of social work are difficult to meet in a situation where a helping worker is supposed to be both a housing provider and a rent collector.

Some organisations initially experimented with the model of simultaneously providing housing and support through social work, but abandoned it after negative experience.

95 “Ten Principles of good practice in social work with people in adverse social situations” of 28 July 2017, File No. 3781/2017/VOP; available at: <https://eso.ochrance.cz>.

96 Section 100 of the Social Services Act.

“We used to have [such a model], but we later concluded it was a bad idea to rent flats as a legal person and then sublet them to our clients. Many of our colleagues in the aid sector do this. Or maybe not many, but at least two big charities do so. We are trying to talk them out of this as gently as possible. After some month or two of operating like that, we realised that this was in fact a totally stupid way of doing things. There’s a terrible conflict of roles that cannot be reconciled. It’s just not possible. I am either your social worker or your landlord.”

R-Mosty

On the other hand, clients mostly need both types of services, and the social aid and real estate services must therefore be provided in a way that they complement and support each other. Problems can arise when the individual areas of work lack the desired synergy, and for example, there are vacant flats to move into, but a suitable client has not been found in due time or there is a lack of capacity on the part of social workers.

“What we’re considering is to have such a department under one roof in the future (...) because, on the one hand, for the sake of not being in conflict of interest, we think it’s good to be the provider [of housing] and to have this separated from the social service, because at some point we simply have to go against those people, or we may follow different goals than the tenants. But at the same time, we should have some social service that’s really ‘in-house’. It might not be directly ours, but we might have it within the centre or some other department, something that would be downright tied to us, because really an awful lot of money is spent and we’re bleeding financially because of the delays in settling-in. Because the service is not ready and we don’t have the leverage. They [social service providers] are simply not required to tell us: ‘we’ll take this client over from you in two weeks.’ And then, for example, there is a flat and everything, the clients want to move in, and we just can’t do it, or we’ll push things back a month because of some problem, because of the service. And that, in turn, means we’re paying for an empty flat for a month.”

Municipal Rental Agency

It should be noted, however, that the organisations we visited which provide both housing and support through social work did not perceive this as a problem, nor did they complain about the conflict of roles. Some of these projects have already been operating for a long time – for example, the Village of Coexistence managed by the Diocesan Charity of Ostrava-Opava. However, the success of the concurrent provision of support and housing may be due to the project’s “high threshold”. For example, the entitlement to housing in the Village was granted to those who had been directly involved in the construction of the individual houses.

On the other hand, where an organisation operates exclusively as a social real estate agency (i.e. it assists clients in finding a flat, preparing a contract, etc.), it cannot do without the support of social services provided by another entity. Such a service setup may also carry some risks. For example, representatives of the Municipal Rental Agency stated that some of the Agency’s operations in Prague started with surprising success in terms of finding suitable flats. An unexpected number of private landlords were approached and there were so many housing opportunities that social services (which are not part of the Municipal Rental Agency) lacked the capacity to attend to the clients:

“The social services of those non-profit organisations quite often provide us with a social service within the complementary network.⁹⁷ I have to be honest and say bluntly that the complementary network was not ready for us at all – for the number of flats that we managed to occupy.”

Municipal Rental Agency

⁹⁷ The complementary network supplements the network of social services determined by the regional authority. The network should consist of a set of social services with sufficient capacity and appropriate quality that are adequately accessible in terms of their location and help to address the adverse social situation of persons in the territory of an administrative region and which are aligned with the identified needs of persons in the territory of the administrative region and the available financial and other resources. Section 3 (i), in conjunction with Section 95 (h), of the Social Services Act.

Various organisations use different ways to link the real estate and social service aspects and this also depends on the specifics of the target groups and the type of service provided. For example, running the social work and real estate agency aspects simultaneously may not pose any risk in the case of organisations providing housing in the form of halfway houses (Organisation for Aid to Refugees), but the opposite will be true of housing projects such as Housing First. This is similar, for example, in the case of sheltered housing. The provision of these types of housing is an essential part of the social service itself, which is implemented by the organisations in the context of assistance to clients.⁹⁸

Participants in the research also consider it a great advantage if they manage to build not only a qualified but also a gender-balanced team. They perceive the strengths of male employees especially in work with certain groups and types of clients who do not always respect female social workers.

One of the barriers to achieving greater male employment in the social sector is poor financial compensation. This not only leads to a lower proportion of male workers, but also carries the risk of increased turnover of both genders.

“At the same time, we also complain a lot about our salaries, because you usually need two jobs to make a living as a social worker. It’s not like I can throw money out of the window, I need some extra income on the side.”

Jako Doma – Homelike

Stable and well co-ordinated staff is a very important and appreciated feature of any team.

“I really appreciate that we are a stable team and we don’t fluctuate, because I don’t quite agree that it would be easy to find qualified workers in Moravia. I think it’s difficult to find people who want to work in the field with the Roma. Who really want to do it.”

Romodrom

Motivation and mutual support of employees is important for the creation of a qualified and stable team. This topic emerged quite naturally from the interviews and the atmosphere in the organisations we visited. Knowing that their work can fundamentally improve the quality of their clients’ lives and that they are making a long-term contribution to improving the social situation in the region where they work helps employees overcome the crisis moments that inevitably come with their work.

“And I feel like it makes sense that we have a lot of households settled-in within the Moravian-Silesian region. How many are there now, ladies? Maybe forty, fifty families gradually settling in, settled in the long term, families that haven’t been living in a proper home just for a year, but for [longer].”

“... that now they’re moving to private owners, they’ve paid their debts. That’s always a huge motivation for me for the future – to see that they love the place they live, they raise their children there and their children already enter the housing system with the vision that they’re no longer in debt, they’re no longer coming from a temporary hostel, from the street, they’re already following the standard path. This is a reward for me and the ladies.”

Romodrom

In terms of staffing, all the organisations (or their sections responsible for settling-in projects) were quite small. The number of staff was less than a hundred employees, usually less than ten. While the low number of team members may be due to financial constraints, it was often mentioned by the participants as a great

98 These are residential social services provided under the Social Services Act.

advantage. Many respondents believe that a small team is better equipped to provide individual care to clients and the organisation also naturally takes on a “family” character.

“I think this is also thanks to the small team. You can’t do five times more work. Even if there were five times as many of you, you wouldn’t be able to do it.

Yes, because we can’t do it, a big team can’t be managed in such a personal way – or perhaps not managed, but brought together as a close-knit group.”

Romodrom

Given the advantages of a smaller team, some of the participants felt that transferring best practice to other locations may be an appropriate way to disseminate settling-in activities. Conversely, simply increasing the staff of organisations may not automatically result in the success of their activities or the number of clients they are able to help.

12. Establishing co-operation with clients

Organisations involve clients in their settlement programmes in accordance with their respective focus. Most often, people in housing need come to them from residential hostels, shelters, other non-profit organisations, social departments of specific municipalities, or child welfare authorities. Clients can also be people on the waiting lists for municipal housing, where the focus is primarily on those who do not achieve a high ranking in the scoring system, so their chances of obtaining municipal housing are low or there is a risk of waiting several years for an allocated flat:

“So the ones who have so few points in this point scoring system, because they use formal criteria – everything has to be documented, confirmed, and they received points according to that – and the ones who have enough points to be accepted, but not enough not to wait for a very long time are handed over to us, or we have a table with recommended people, because they have only twenty-five points. And at the same time, if someone newer comes in and has thirty points, they always jump ahead of those with twenty-five points.”

Municipal Rental Agency

Many clients were recruited by organisations during the Covid-19 pandemic, when many people in housing need, especially the homeless, were concentrated in what was called “Covid hotels”. After the pandemic was over, it was logical to continue working with these people and support them in obtaining standard housing.

“They went to those hotels and there were suddenly fifty, sixty people from the street there at once, so these were very difficult times. But applications for flats were made for those people. The way it works is that there are waiting lists, and if you want to apply for social housing, you have to file an application and you get on the waiting list. There is a points system, and the more sick or disadvantaged you are, also because of your age, the higher you get on the list. So there were elderly women, in their seventies or so, who were on the street and suddenly got a flat in a very short period of time and needed to be taught all those things and supported in the process of settling in.”

Jako Doma – Homelike

The situation is different for those organisations that have only a very limited number of vacant flats. There is usually a significant excess of demand in these cases. Some organisations choose clients in close co-operation with social service providers who already recommend people from among their clients for settling-in activities.

“It’s a Sophie’s choice in a way, but it’s fair. The co-operation [with the social service that proposes clients for settling-in] is good and they try to make it work, so that – if I put it bluntly – they don’t embarrass themselves by [not] recommending a suitable person, which is not always guaranteed (...); they say: ‘Look, we really don’t recommend this one because we don’t think it would work.’ So they’re bringing a lot of preselection into the equation. But in the end, it’s our decision whom we’ll put there and we choose between at least two or three [candidates].”

Affordable Housing Fund

Other ways of establishing co-operation with clients depend on the target group. Some organisations actively monitor who, for example, has nowhere to go after being released from a long-term treatment in a psychiatric hospital or addiction treatment facility. Others focus on young people leaving institutional settings and institutions (institutions for foreign children, boarding schools for young people with disabilities, etc.). Close co-operation with these facilities is necessary in these cases. The planned date of the client’s release must be determined well in advance so that a suitable flat can be found and arranged for the client in due time. Thus, the client’s transition from the institution to standard housing can be smooth, and a proactive approach of the helping organisations somewhat reduces the risk of a drop in the social status during these vulnerable periods of life. Actively seeking out people at risk of housing need is thus an important tool to prevent the deterioration of their situation, which could make future assistance options very difficult.

The organisations also offer their services to potential clients on their websites or through leaflets. However, they are often so well known that clients contact them directly.

“And they [the clients] are coming to us from many places. First of all, there’s the word of mouth, and secondly, of course, the system’s been in place for years. And sometimes a suitable client may come from a low threshold facility or a national supervision centre⁹⁹. Or from the social counselling centre here. So they recommend them right away. But people often call. It’s known. Now, for example, since the beginning of the year – today is the fourth, it’s the third working day. The third working day and four or five families have already called to come here.”

R-Mosty

It is very rare that co-operation is established with clients in that the organisation rents a building where the clients are already living. This approach is currently being tested in one of the projects carried out by the Diocesan Charity of Ostrava-Opava that builds on previous community work with socially excluded residents of this particular building. The case is unique in that the service is not offered to and received by the clients in the usual way, but rather arises from a contractual relationship linked to the flats in question.

“This wasn’t their call for help: ‘Please help us with this and that’; it is that you guys, I can say, have really gone all the way to the bottom and you can even work with these people who wouldn’t even be able to ask for help themselves, right?”

Well, they have an incentive, you know, when you have a sublease in your hand, they just want to stay, of course, so it’s a pressure of sorts.

(..) Yeah, it’s just that when we started there, I was like: Look, here’s the social service, you’ll each have your own worker. They were more or less ordered to do this, right?”

Diocesan Charity of Ostrava-Opava

⁹⁹ This is a low-threshold day centre that provides services to homeless people, including, for example, appropriate conditions for personal hygiene, and provision of food or assistance with personal affairs. This is a social service listed in Section 61 of the Social Services Act.

Of course, this approach may conflict with the principles of social work, according to which co-operation should always be voluntary and the client should not be forced to co-operate. That being said, according to the organisation's staff, this approach was the only way to help, for example, the children who were living in these very unfavourable conditions.

It is clear from the above that various organisations/projects have different criteria for accepting new clients. Some of the projects are completely low-threshold ventures (for example, they even tolerate substance abuse to some extent). Others, on the other hand, have a relatively high threshold – e.g. the Village of Coexistence (also managed by the Diocesan Charity of Ostrava-Opava), where the right to rent a house was based on the number of hours worked on its construction, which required highly motivated and co-operative clients.

However, the different criteria for client entry into the service also reflect the diversity of clients and their different starting conditions. Differently designed services, targeted at clients in different circumstances, offer a chance to obtain and retain housing in almost any difficult life situation.

13. Working with the client

In the survey, we determined which ways of approaching clients worked best for the individual organisations. The following five approaches, which were repeatedly mentioned by survey participants as essential for the success of their work, appear to be of key importance: mutual trust and respect; individualised approach; open communication; service networking; and participation. In the following chapters, we will discuss each of these topics in more detail.

13.1 MUTUAL TRUST AND RESPECT

Mutual trust and respect is a prerequisite for successful co-operation between the client and the helping organisation. Clients are expected to provide truthful and complete information about their social and financial circumstances and needs, and to alert the helping organisation's staff to any changes in a timely manner. Ideally, clients should adhere to what they agreed with the staff, who in turn should act in the clients' best interests.

In reality, however, mutual trust is sometimes lost. In housing projects, this typically occurs in a situation where a client claims to have paid rent regularly, but it is later discovered that this was not the case. Thus, it is sometimes very difficult for the workers to strike a balance between trust and control. In some projects, this risk is mitigated by the fact that payments always go through a specific staff member (payment manager). There is thus an accurate overview of outgoing payments.

However, other organisations operate on a different principle where payments go directly from the client to the landlord – then there is a risk of rent arrears. Although the ideal situation is one where the client is as independent as possible, sometimes the client learns the necessary skills gradually. Organisations then look for ways to avoid risks. Risk prevention can also be ensured in ways other than by taking over the client's responsibilities or by controlling the client.

According to the survey participants, the solution is to build an open relationship with the client, give the client enough time, create an informal atmosphere and allay any initial fears they may have. This enables the organisation's staff to learn about potential problems in time to address them.

“Don't let them feel like we're controlling them. They're initially terribly afraid that we're going to look at what's in their fridge, what they're going to cook and so on. So we're here to talk things over with them, assure them it's really not like that at all. But sometimes they'll say they don't have any problems, but then we'll have a coffee or tea with them and over it we'll find out that some problems do exist.”

Romodrom

Peer workers are an important help in building trust between social workers and clients. These people form natural bridges between clients and the organisation, and their role is irreplaceable. Peer workers bring their own personal experience to the relationship with the client, helping to deepen understanding on both sides and to motivate clients to turn their lives around.

“The girls [field social workers] don’t have such a problem with that because they come from the community. But for me as a white woman, it is important to learn to respect Roma culture, and the girls help me tremendously with that. I know that when I go to a client and she will serve me lunch, I must not refuse because it would offend her. Or when we dealt with the case of a client who said she’d seen ghosts in her flat, I noted – using my white woman’s common sense – that it’s nonsense and that there’s something else behind all this, that she didn’t want to be in the flat. But I have to respect that for them, this is a real problem, because it is part of their culture and they believe in such things...”

Romodrom

“There’s a peer worker there, so we have a full-time colleague who has experience with housing need and dealing with personal social issues. And she actually uses her own story as an example to motivate those clients to work on themselves.”

Vavřinec

“...I’ve kind of gotten used to it now, I no longer have a problem with it, but I totally understand the girls that going out with normal people all of a sudden is weird... after twenty years of being on the street, you look the part, it shows on your face, a stigma of the street...”

Jako Doma – Homelike

On the other hand, it is also essential that clients respect the workers with whom they are in contact, as well as the rules they have agreed together. The interviews revealed that most of the workers had a considerable degree of tolerance and patience. However, if the client repeatedly violates the rules and, above all, if they lose the will to deal with their problems and communicate, the co-operation is terminated. The workers see great danger especially in situations where the client’s actions directly threaten the reputation of the organisation. However, in the experience of the organisations, this is not common.

“The lady is just unable to make any progress¹⁰⁰. She’s not able to respond to the programme and she’s jeopardising our entire project and other people who are then in huge trouble and bad luck because we’re not getting flats. And you can’t help anyone when you’ve got no flats. Our team always has to deal with it so that such people don’t jeopardise the whole project. Usually, it’s only a few individuals, though.”

Romodrom

13.2 INDIVIDUALISED APPROACH

The essence of working with a client lies in a consistent **individualised approach**. Such an approach is used from the beginning of the co-operation, as the client’s financial and social situation, as well as the needs and ideas regarding housing, are identified during conversations between the client and the workers. The client

¹⁰⁰ This is a client who, according to the survey participant, is not able to deal with her addictions, repeatedly bothers her neighbours and even though she has been given a second chance in a new flat, her behaviour remains problematic.

expresses their ideas about the area where their flat should be located and what characteristics it should have, and the staff arranges housing that best matches the client's ideas and possibilities. Pairing clients with flats is a very responsible task that needs a lot of attention.

"This was a family that our colleagues from another branch worked with. They moved the family in a flat, a beautiful, luxurious, refurbished flat, absolutely gorgeous, and it all ended up with damage worth a hundred thousand crowns (...). And then about six months later, they came to our branch and we didn't know it was the same family. We identified their needs and their ideas, and we found out that they wanted to raise rabbits and chickens and poultry and the like, and that this was absolutely not a family suitable for living in a flat. They had completely different ideas and completely different needs, and we found a small detached house for them, which they moved into and kept their rabbits and chickens, and have lived there ever since. So this is all about respecting the client's needs and wishes."

Romodrom

When arranging flats for clients, it is essential to take into account the size of the family and the size of the flat. Conflicts should be avoided, for example, by not placing multiple, and therefore potentially noisier, families in flats in generally quiet buildings, occupied predominantly by elderly people. A part of the municipality to which the client has some ties is chosen wherever possible. Although most organisations seek flats for their clients outside socially excluded localities and this is also often a condition of project funding, there are cases where the clients themselves have asked for flats in such localities.

"These people are used to living together. They don't have enough self-confidence to live alone somewhere among white people. They just... Well, they don't feel comfortable with that."

"Not all of them, but some are like that."

Diocesan Charity of Ostrava-Opava

13.3 OPEN COMMUNICATION

A very effective tool in client work is **open communication**, preferably with all formal and informal subjects the client comes into contact with – family, partners, neighbours, friends, therapists, social and other workers, the landlord, the wider community and others. The most sophisticated form of open communication we encountered was used by organisations working with people who had experienced mental illness.

For example, the Garden 2000 organisation also uses the psychiatric approach or the Open Dialogue method for settling-in purposes.¹⁰¹ This approach consists, among other things, in multidisciplinary meetings (e.g. psychiatrist, social worker, peer worker, client's family members and friends, etc.) where the participants, together with the client, try to find a way of treatment or a procedure for solving the problem, in this case finding a place to live. Clients and their families are generally not spoken about in their absence.¹⁰²

We also encountered a similar approach in other organisations. Although the survey participants did not explicitly state that they knew about and applied the Open Dialogue method, they often arrived at similar practices. We therefore use the generic term "open communication" as it better conveys the essence of such approach.

¹⁰¹ The Open Dialogue method is a systematic, language-based approach to psychiatric care that emerged in the 1980s. It uses the client's social network to solve problems and also serves as a form of crisis intervention in cases of severe psychiatric problems.

¹⁰² Open Dialogue. Online. Available (in Czech) at: <https://otevrenedialogy.cz/index.php/otevreny-dialog> [retrieved on: 2023-09-30].

In some cases, open communication is pursued not only with the client's family or close environment, but also with the wider public. An interesting case study was described by a worker of the Garden 2000 organisation. One of its clients was a woman with a noticeable mental illness:

"And the client (...) is a lady who suffers from Tourette syndrome, which means that she sometimes screams and cries out, and she has a pretty strong voice so she's quite loud. And [the town of] Jeseník is small, so you can hear her from far away. Sometimes she falls down, which is... Yeah, she's the kind of person that, on the face of it, everybody would prefer to [lock away in] an institution."

Garden 2000

Thanks to the organisation, the client managed to find a flat. As problems emerged in the wider community, the organisation took several steps to destigmatise the client:

"So we also organised a network meeting here as part of an open dialogue, including neighbours and a guardian, now from the town of Jeseník, who also deals with the social benefits. (...) And we did a bigger campaign once, where we told her story with some introduction, like from an expert, a psychiatrist and a psychologist and such, about the illness, and did an interview with her and so on. So we kind of ran it through the local media to let them know who's who and what things are like."

Garden 2000

The woman's case was published in the local press with her consent, which helped to alleviate fears about her illness and improved her acceptance by the community. Open communication was carried out not only with the client and her immediate environment, but also via the media, with the whole community. However, such a solution is rather exceptional and is certainly related to the significant manifestations of the client's disease. In other forms, open communication is more focused on the client's immediate environment.

Communication with the clients' neighbours is a separate topic. In some cases, such communication already takes place between the staff of the helping organisation and the neighbours before the client settles in. This model is mentioned more frequently by survey participants working with mentally ill people.

"When we started to move people in the flat, there were no clients there yet, so we went to introduce ourselves to the neighbours. We said what organisation we were from and who we worked with, and that we'd be staying in the flat upstairs. That's all we shared, and the neighbours were given a business card, a contact number, so that if anything happened, if they needed to tell us anything, they shouldn't hesitate to contact us."

Práh Southern Moravia

However, organisations tend not to use this model for other target groups. The participants see it as a risk of stigmatising their clients and use it only rarely.

"No, I think we'd stigmatise them up front [NB: responding to the question of whether they had notified the neighbours when a client was moving in]. If the clients want to, we'll go with them – with their consent and in their presence – to see the neighbours closest to them to introduce themselves and tell them about the project. Otherwise we don't do that."

Vavřinec

Open communication also plays an indispensable role in resolving any neighbour disputes or complaints.

“Communicate, try to communicate as much as possible with all the parties. Get in touch with the person who complained as soon as possible. Meet with them. If they are not interested in a meeting, ask them for all the documentation on which the complaint is based. Search for objective, verifiable, clear facts (...) And address the problem using clear mechanisms. Of course, when we do manage to get the person to communicate directly, it’s important that they don’t feel that won’t listen to them under any circumstances and that we’ll always be on the client’s side. [emphatically] No, we have to show them a certain degree of empathy...”

Community Work Centre in Western Bohemia

Open communication is used where it makes sense and is in the client’s interest. This involves formal and informal actors, individuals, organisations and the community as a whole. It very closely relates to another effective way of helping vulnerable people to find or retain housing – service networking, which is the subject of the following chapter.

13.4 SERVICE NETWORKING

In all of the organisations, we found a dense network of relationships and co-operation established with various entities. Most often, the survey participants mentioned co-operation with municipal or city ward councillors, the BSLPC, labour offices, the police (for example, in cases of stalking or domestic violence), therapists (for example, the help of psychologists for war refugees), social workers from municipalities, debt counsellors, providers of follow-up social services, healthcare facilities, furniture banks, pedagogical-psychological consulting centres, and the Klokánek children’s facilities (facilities for children in need of immediate help), as well as with churches, schools, businesses and social enterprises providing employment to clients. Others also described co-operation with the Social Housing Platform or the Social Endowment Fund of the City of Prague. Informal client’s caregivers (family members, friends) are also included in the network if the workers see a benefit in this.

Networking is beneficial not only for the clients, but also for the service providers who can use close contacts with similar organisations as an opportunity to share their experience, and gain inspiration and support for their work.

“Sometimes we go to meetings called ‘case study seminars’ where we meet with representatives of the settling-in teams from various organisations and where we can share some stories and cases that we don’t know how to deal with. So it’s always very refreshing, very supportive.”

Jako Doma – Homelike

Close co-operation among entities with a similar social mission also has the added advantage that they can set up their services in such a way as to complement each other with respect to the needs in the given region.

“We go through all the similar services that are here in Brno (...), we communicate with each other on various working platforms, so we’ve known each other for a long time (...), and at the same time, we want to distinguish ourselves and look for those elements that they have significantly different from us, so that when a person leaves the hospital or treatment, and wants to go to Brno and chooses a service, we can introduce ourselves and our work with a leaflet and some information so that they can choose a service according to that, find out what suits them and what doesn’t.”

Renadi

What also proved very successful was the organisation of internships in which employees of the Psychiatric Hospital in Brno visited services provided by the Práh Southern Moravia organisation, such as sheltered housing. The nurses and health-social workers had the opportunity to see how their former patients were doing in their new homes, and above all, that they were able to live in these conditions with more or less support and not be dependent on institutional care.

Interviewer: "Were the interns surprised to see their former patients there?"

"Some of them were (laughs). Some were pleasantly surprised. And when the former patient showed them around the flat, showed them where he lived, showed them his room, talked about going to work, they were all the more surprised."

Práh Southern Moravia

Even in these cases, communication with health professionals helps to prevent stigmatisation in the sense that these professionals see for themselves that their former patients are able to live in a natural environment. According to the organisation, it was thanks to these internships that they changed their minds. Changes in their mindset could facilitate the deinstitutionalisation process in the future.

Although networks are used vigorously by the organisations and work well in most cases, some gaps were mentioned by the participants, especially in governmental institutions. The biggest problem they saw was that the co-operation often depended solely on the personality and goodwill of the staff member.

"Because I have excellent co-operation with one particular staff member of the body for social and legal protection of children. She's great. We agreed how it would work with the family, directly with the family, and they approved this, and it's indeed working. And then there's another one, another employee of this body, and it's never going to work there. OK, maybe not never, I don't want to say that, but it's not working for us."

Diocesan Charity of Ostrava-Opava

A similar situation, where the decisive aspect is a given person's personal setting, rather than the commitment resulting from their profession, was frequently mentioned by the survey participants in the interviews. This also concerned, for example, staff members of labour offices, but mainly political representatives of municipalities and city wards. In many cases, the organisations stated that they were not getting the support they needed from the politicians. This varies greatly from region to region.

"...municipalities don't take the concerns of their poorest seriously. They don't care, more or less. Politicians themselves don't care at all; social workers at the BSLPC might care a little bit, depending on which one we're dealing with..."

Diocesan Charity of Ostrava-Opava

Some participants also mentioned as a shortcoming the lack of availability of professions that their clients needed, such as child psychologists and psychiatrists, doctors and debt counselling.

The networking of services and actors is even more important as most of the organisations we included in the survey do not have a large staff. Their work covers primarily the area of housing, but this aspect usually represents only one of several interrelated problems the client is facing. What is very important is the ability to recommend the form of help that the client needs. Every shift in a client's life, whether it is debt repayment,

housing stabilisation, getting a job or finding a partner, then has a synergistic positive impact on other areas of the client's life.

However, if all key players come together and set a common goal, significant changes can be achieved in the region.

"... [It's] a great example of how things can work when the non-profit sector and the city come together. There they are again very open and very supportive, and they care about the same things and there is a really wonderful co-operation. There are case (...) conferences over clients and so on, there are several NGOs involved as well as the city authorities, social departments, housing departments. It just works there and the proof is that within three quarters of a year they managed to completely close one whole residential hostel, which was closed down and the people moved into normal, standard housing..."

Romodrom

13.5 PARTICIPATION

Another important element in working with clients is their active **participation** in the settling-in process and later stages. The survey participants repeatedly emphasised that the aim was for the clients to engage in accordance with their capabilities. In some cases, a "mere" adherence to the agreed meetings and rules was considered successful participation. However, the aim is to achieve gradual independence and the acquisition of competences for normal life or life with as little support as possible, taking into account the client's limits.

"We want [the clients] to go and look at the flat, to communicate with the owner, to arrange the move. We're not the ones to make the offer first. We're just the last resort when things don't work out. But if it's a family with a 16-year-old boy and a 35-year-old father, we're not sending our people there to help them carry stuff. Because that would just be wrong. So we insist on their participation."

R-Mosty

In some cases, clients are able to live with little or no support, and instead put their own experience and energy back into projects. These then gradually become even community-based; a high level of participation of all the stakeholders is a natural and desirable outcome of the whole process. It is also undoubtedly a success when a former client becomes a person who takes advantage of their experience to support other clients or the community.

"For example, we supported the association thus created for six years. These were ordinary residents of a socially excluded locality and now they're members of a community group."

"They are so proud of their common journey that they like to go to other locations in their free time, as volunteers, to pass on their experience."

Diocesan Charity of Ostrava-Opava

"I'd like to add that we actually offer to those who've successfully passed through the service that can continue to come once a month to our large community meeting. And I have hope that there will be more and more of us, and that it will be a community that can then support each other beyond the boundaries of the social service and maybe relate to each other. And it might carry a little bit of risk, but I actually see some of that community character that could be interesting."

Renadi

14. Acquiring properties for the projects

The organisations acquire flats (or even houses) for clients to settle-in through various channels. Either they buy them directly and can then dispose of them more freely, or they acquire municipal or private flats for the projects, which they can offer to clients. A combination of properties from multiple sources is also possible (and common). Each of these options has different advantages and disadvantages. The intention of this chapter is to present in more detail the options mentioned, including ways of working with homeowners as a specific challenge of housing projects.

A rather surprising finding of our survey was that only in a minority of cases did organisations mention that they had a shortage of housing. Several survey participants said that they would be able to find more properties, but the organisations or collaborating social services lacked sufficient staff capacity that the clients needed to successfully settle in.

Some of the stakeholders provide their clients with their own flats, albeit sometimes acquired with loans, which they gradually repay. This is the case of the Affordable Housing Fund. The founder of this organisation bought several flats using a loan, which he is repaying with rent from clients. On its website, the organisation allows the general public to get involved in the project, either through long-term loans or donations to the fund.

Some of the organisations have purchased several flats within the framework of public grant projects (e.g. IROP) and rent them out on a long-term basis. Apart from various grants, opportunities to buy or reconstruct own property were quite rare – for example, in the form of proceeds from a charity concert (Práh Southern Moravia).

Only a minority of organisations provide their own flats to clients. This is mainly due to the need for a significant initial investment, which is usually beyond the organisations' financial means (which is why we encounter private individuals in this category). Another disadvantage, already mentioned in the previous chapter, is the potential conflict of roles, where on the one hand, the organisation provides support and assistance to the client, and on the other hand, it is in the position of a landlord defending its own interests. In contrast, the advantage of this model is that there is no need to negotiate with the owners of the flats (as a third party), for example, about the duration of the lease, the amount of rent, etc.

The acquisition of municipal or private housing is much more common. The advantage of municipal flats is the relatively lower rent. On the other hand, the main drawback is that there is a shortage of such flats. Some municipalities have sold their housing stock. In others, the housing allocation system is not always favourable to vulnerable groups, and even social housing is sometimes bound to relatively high thresholds. The current political representatives of the municipalities and their varying priorities and degrees of friendliness towards settling-in projects also play a big role. Where this support exists, it opens up a much greater opportunity for the use of municipal housing. Good will is often not enough, however, because the complex and lengthy system of allocating flats makes it impossible to respond flexibly to the emerging needs of the clients.

“The reason we didn't want to work with those city wards was because they were not flexible enough. We apply for the flats, and they somehow assign the flats to us within, let's say, six months, and then we rush to quickly find subtenants.”

Diocesan Charity of Ostrava-Opava

A similar experience was mentioned many times by the survey participants, who pointed to much more flexible communication with private owners:

“It's hard to process this at the city hall. I understand it; there has to be political will, the group of politicians has to push it through the housing commission to recommend it to the council, the council has to approve it and the same is true of the assembly. And then we wait for the flats to clear up. When the flat becomes available, we have to provide a specific client, we have to have a specific client in mind based on the assessment of needs, we have to describe their story so that the housing commission reviews it and approves it, and then the council has to

approve it. So it's quite a cumbersome process. Whereas with a private landlord, we say: 'Well, tomorrow we'll be there with the client at two o'clock' and they'll have a deal within ten or fifteen minutes."

Vavřinec

Reaching out to private owners seems to be much more efficient, and according to our observation, flats provided for rent by private owners now predominate in settling-in projects. The paths to these flats vary. In small municipalities, it is usually enough to activate the social networks of helping organisations and their staff. Companies with a longer history tend to already be generally known by the residents of the region, and homeowners sometimes come forward themselves with property offers. In larger towns and cities, organisations publish notices in the press, on online social networks or on company websites.

The first experience with the organisation is crucial. If it manages to honour its commitments and prove to the homeowner that its project is viable and that they can rely on the organisation, it is then successful in establishing co-operation with further owners.

"... I never tried to do some massive campaign and find a lot of flats, but we tried to maintain good reputation of the people we'd housed, and it paid off in the previous project that the owners themselves made known that something had worked. They already called that they had got contact from Mr Novák that we were managing his affairs and that it was working, and they might have something for rent."

Romodrom

For the sake of completeness, mention should also be made of the various organisations' attempts to find flats using standard real estate agencies. Although there are some isolated cases of positive experience in this area, this route has mostly proved elusive.

"We didn't do quite so well there; we were finding out just how tough the market was and how they wanted the best tenants and the most money, so we weren't getting too far there."

Romodrom

Acquiring private flats is therefore mostly based on other channels than approaching real estate agents and is associated with many challenges. Above all, staff must sufficiently motivate landlords to rent their flats through their organisation instead of the usual route. They therefore offer homeowners guarantees which are not included in a regular lease agreement. Survey participants agree that it is appropriate to offer at least three basic guarantees to the owners:

- » guarantee of regular rent payments;
- » guarantee of decent handling of the flat and its furnishing, and repair of any potential damage;
- » effective resolution of any neighbourhood disputes.

According to the available options, the organisations also offer other benefits to the owners, such as the payment of several months' rent in advance (Municipal Rental Agency). Some organisations also reported that even seemingly minor things, such as having someone administer the rent for the landlord, including annual billing, worked as an incentive. Conversely, concessions can sometimes be negotiated on the landlord's side – for example, the homeowner does not require a security deposit if the rent is guaranteed (Garden 2000).

If an owner offers their flat for a settling-in project, the organisation must first decide whether the flat will be accepted into the project at all. The condition of the flat and its location in the municipality are considered. Where possible, flats in excluded locations are not included in the project (sometimes as a condition for external financing) and the same is true of properties in poor technical condition. At the same time, the

organisation tries to prevent segregation and, hence, does not place more than one supported family in the same building.

“And the flats, so that’s the first thing we deal with according to Sýkora [according to the locations of residential segregation]¹⁰³. Then we try to ensure that no more than two flats are located at one street number; this is also strict in the new call for offers, so I think that if there are four flats in a building, then only can be involved, we just have some [rules] that we follow. Then the flat must be functional; it must have windows, doors, hot water, heating – just standard things. We don’t differentiate by size, we take what comes in and try to fit the family to that.”

Vavřinec

In some cases, however, municipalities provide only flats in excluded localities for housing projects, and so those are used when there is no other choice.

“City wards will not give us flats in lucrative areas for our target group; it’s thus always a socially excluded locality...”

Diocesan Charity of Ostrava-Opava

The size of the flat is also considered, and some organisations avoid large flats because their experience tells them that this would be beyond the financial resources of most clients:

“We told ourselves that [nothing should be] above 80 square metres, unless we have a family clearly identified in advance or we have someone on our waiting list who looks like they might be able to pay for it, and there’s that size of family, we’ll not take flats like that. And we don’t take them. Ever.”

Municipal Rental Agency

Other criteria are also considered, such as distance to the city centre and accessibility for social workers (organisations choose flats in areas where they operate). However, they also reject flats that are too luxurious, both because of the clients’ unwillingness to live in such properties and because of the high rent that can be expected in such a flat:

“I’m trying to tell this openly to the owners to start with. Our target group are people who used to live in a ghetto, lived on the streets and are not used to a dishwasher and some high-end kitchen equipment, and I don’t want to assume responsibility for any damage to the equipment, so sometimes I’ll even recommend that we either look for someone who can manage to live there or they should just find another tenant.”

Romodrom

If a flat is chosen for the project, it is then matched with a suitable client based on consideration of their individual characteristics and needs. Ideally, the connection will be made as soon as possible so that the flat is not left unnecessarily empty and the client can move in as soon as possible.

103 Sýkora, Luděk et al. Lokality sociálního vyloučení a segregace (Localities of Social Exclusion and Segregation). Online, Faculty of Science of Charles University 2020. Available (in Czech) at: <https://web.natur.cuni.cz/segregace/aplikace/segregace/> [retrieved on: 2023-11-30].

15. Rent amounts and financing, guarantee funds

Determining the appropriate amount of rent is the key aspect and a complicated part of the settling-in process.

The situation is simpler in municipal flats, where the rent is fixed and usually lower compared to privately owned flats. Rents charged by private homeowners may be higher, but there is more room for negotiation (typically waiving the requirement for a security deposit).

Organisations that use privately-owned flats usually negotiate rent that is slightly below the levels usual in the area. The survey participants stated that lower rent was offset by legal and social services and guarantees that were not available in a regular tenancy relationship and which were provided to the owner of the flat beyond the usual terms. These services are generally welcomed by property owners and are of greater benefit to them than maximising rental profit.

“Our target group are those owners [of flats] who are in fact people who are more likely to be college educated, who have one or two vacant flats in the family without some major commitments like a crazy high mortgage or something, and who perceive that other people have a problem finding affordable housing. So they’ll have no problem giving up some of that potential income for the peace of mind in renting. At the same time, they’ll do something good for people who wouldn’t be able to find a flat otherwise.”

Municipal Rental Agency

If necessary, the staff will inform the client what the total housing costs consist of (utilities, rent, TV fee, etc.) and then monitor whether the clients pay them regularly.

“It might be that a client who is used to living in a shelter, typically a single mother, may not know how to save on utilities. Because in shelters they don’t have to worry about energy consumption at all. They pay a flat fee for the use of the service and they don’t have their own electricity, gas and water meters to keep track of. So they have to learn how to save, when to use the heater, how to deal with all this.”

Community Work Centre in Western Bohemia

This is why some of the organisations also regularly monitor the clients’ energy consumption in order to respond in time and prevent large debts that the clients would then be unable to pay.

“... practice has taught us, and therefore, within the Housing project, my colleague also monitors the utilities, energy consumption every month, so she goes and visits the clients and teaches them to keep track of their energy consumption, keep a separate spreadsheet, and when they see that the bill is significantly off, they react by adjusting the amount of the advances, because otherwise they get into really big debts and, given the number of flats used, we wouldn’t be able to cover all this from the guarantee fund...”

Vavřinec

Clients often use housing allowances and contributions towards housing to finance their rent, and benefits of extraordinary immediate assistance, or other benefits, to provide the security deposit. Nevertheless, in some life situations, the client may not be able to pay the rent. The existence of a guarantee fund, which some of the organisations set up, has proven useful in case of these exceptional shortfalls. They create a certain financial buffer to bridge crisis situations.

“... there is a cushion in this project as well and we can use it to provide the guarantees, so that, whatever happens in that flat, whether it’s empty or whether those tenants just pay us or not, we always pay those owners regardless, and we can also collect that rent, or what we

call guaranteed income, a year in advance, so we need that financial cushion pretty big in this regard.”

Municipal Rental Agency

However, the guarantee fund is not intended to make up for long-term insolvency of the clients. Its purpose is rather to cover one-off expenses, for example, in the event of moving or in case of unexpected situations such as the client’s illness or accident. However, it sometimes also has to be used because of delays in the payment of benefits, for example from the Labour Office.

“So it is necessary to reach into the guarantee fund even due to the Labour Office, because the benefits are a month or two late and the owner will not wait for them. So in such cases, we pay the rent in advance from the guarantee fund and the given amount is then reimbursed.”

Community Work Centre in Western Bohemia

However, not every organisation has a guarantee fund. If it cannot or will not guarantee rent payments to the homeowners, it at least undertakes to actively try and resolve any problems:

“We simply guarantee that we’ll stay in touch with him [the client] , that we’ll mediate with the client, and that in those extreme situations when, for example, the tenant has to be evicted, which has actually happened maybe twice in all these years, we’ll be there and we’ll do something about the things we had strewn on the sidewalk, we’ll safely store them and so on.”

R-Mosty

16. Contractual regulation of relationships

The relationships of all the parties involved are contractually regulated in various ways. It is essential that the respective roles and obligations of the parties be clearly defined. Most often, three parties enter the relationship: the client, the landlord and the helping organisation. Alternatively, there may also be four parties, if the real estate and social service areas are separate actors in client work, and the client is supported in settling-in by another organisation, usually from among social service providers.

A sophisticated model is involved, for example, in the system of contracts concluded by the Community Work Centre in Western Bohemia. The cornerstone is a **lease contract** between the client and the homeowner. At the same time, the organisation enters into a **guarantee agreement** with the owner. The agreement identifies the specific client as a participant in the settling-in project; this provides specific guarantees to the owner (e.g. payment of rent even if the client fails to pay, regular inspection of the condition of the flat, mediation in solving any problems, etc.). Furthermore, a **tripartite** agreement is concluded among the client, the organisation and the social service provider. This agreement defines the respective obligations of the two organisations towards the client and vice versa.

“We always sign a tripartite co-operation agreement among the client, the organisation providing the social service and us, which clearly defines who does what and what the client should expect, and what our competencies are within the project, and what are the competencies of the social workers. How we communicate with each other, who we pass information to, how we handle crisis situations, and so on. Where everything is defined in terms of concrete co-operation, once the flat is available.”

Community Work Centre in Western Bohemia

The only pitfall of this contracting system is that the client may terminate the tripartite agreement or may not honour it after moving into the flat, while the lease continues nevertheless.

“Of course, if the client is stubborn and says he’ll not honour this agreement, he need not to, you can’t make them do it. We cannot force a client to co-operate. That’s the risk involved in these projects. If you get someone in there who is cunning enough to do so then you have little leverage to get that person off the project. Because getting rid of a tenant can sometimes be very complicated, and can take years.”

Community Work Centre in Western Bohemia

However, in the experience of the survey participants, this kind of risk is not that high. In most cases, the clients co-operate and appreciate the assistance provided in the search for housing.

Along with the model described above, there are also other options for contractual arrangements. Particularly common is a model where the organisation involved enters directly into the lease relationship – for example, it concludes a lease contract with the homeowner along with another agreement by which it provides the flat to the client for use. If the client acquires the appropriate competences and honours all their obligations for a certain period of time, the organisation then “withdraws” from the role of intermediary and only the regular relationship between the client (tenant) and the landlord will continue. This – or very similarly – is how the Garden 2000 organisation works. The risks of such an arrangement, where the organisation provides the client both with housing and with the related support and assistance was already discussed above. Even so, some organisations use this model and mitigate these risks thanks to their experience.

A similar model with the role of “intermediary” is also practiced by the Municipal Rental Agency. However, the arrangement it enters into with the homeowner is not a lease contract, but rather an “innominate contract”¹⁰⁴ (specifically, a contract for the provision of a flat).

“The City of Prague’s contributory organisation cannot provide any such guarantee for another contractual relationship.¹⁰⁵ (...) So we could be neither a tenant, nor a guarantor or a manager, so they came up with (...) an innominate contract. We call it a contract for the provision of a flat from the owner to us.”

Municipal Rental Agency

The only disadvantage of this arrangement mentioned by the Municipal Rental Agency’s employee is that such a contract is not a commonly known type and thus arouses distrust among some homeowners.

An integral part of housing contracts is a set time limit for the provision of housing. Those organisations that rent out their own properties are in a better position. They need not reconcile the term of lease (from the municipality, from a private owner) with the period of subsequent provision of the flat to the clients. Conversely, organisations that rent out flats need to reconcile the two distinct contracts so that housing for clients is sustainable in the long term.

“I’m going to move the last client in here in September; three others already live there, they all plan to stay there. We’re certainly not burdening them with anything. We still have some contracts with the city and I’m eventually going to apply properly for a renewal. That means that the little bit of vagueness is annoying, but that’s just a technicality that they have the right not to renew the contract.”

Renadi

104 Innominate contracts are contracts that are not regulated by the law as a contractual type (unlike, for example, a lease contract). Their essential elements are thus not regulated by the law, and the parties themselves are the ones to stipulate their mutual rights and obligations.

105 Contributory organisation are not authorised to stand surety for or otherwise secure the obligations of third parties. Section 34 (2) of Act No. 250/2000 Coll., on the budgetary rules for territorial budgets.

The goal is for a client who is capable of retaining their housing to have the opportunity to stay in the flat in the long term, either with an annually renewed contract or with a permanent contract, wherever possible. For example, the Village of Coexistence (houses owned by the Diocesan Charity of Ostrava-Opava) houses a significant number of tried and tested tenants for an indefinite period of time.

“We have (...) 14 or so lease contracts for an indefinite period, because we have set quite strict conditions for that to happen. I think they must have lived there for eight years at least, they must not be late with their payments for some three years and they must not have any conflicts, and they have to be okay with the ethnic coexistence project, of course. So I think there are 14 now who have already met the conditions and have an indefinite lease.”

Diocesan Charity of Ostrava-Opava

17. Settling-in principles

In the previous chapter, we mentioned that the housing projects’ goal is to stabilise the clients in long-term housing. However, there are approaches that offer other ways in specific situations and for selected target groups. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the various principles of housing (Housing First, Housing Led, Housing Ready) and the context in which – according to the survey participants – they provide the biggest benefit.

“Well, we argued a lot within the Housing First and those meetings about whether it’s good to just focus on Housing First, and completely discard the Housing Ready concept. But even yesterday, we made it clear with the lady here, the head of the social services department, that it’s probably a good thing if the two approaches are used side by side, because neither Housing First nor Housing Ready is suitable for every client. The best way is to have both of those options available and try to fit a client into a particular area.”

Vavřinec

Housing First is an approach where the client is provided with housing as a first step towards solving their other problems (e.g. finding a job, stabilising family relationships, resolving debts, etc.). Its advantage is that it allows clients to arrange their living conditions directly in a specific area, knowing that everything they build there will remain with them in the future. Compared to other approaches, it offers clients a long-term solution to their situation.

“What bothered me about the social housing system, was that it was time-limited... a flow-through thing.

Even if I acknowledge that the person settled in, established some neighbourly relations, created networks, somehow made a home there, and because he was really so good, he was ‘punished’ by having to leave and start all over again two years later, which is not our goal, because neither you nor I, nobody wants to move all the time, so we want to make sure that if people have some ties there, they have a better chance of staying in the flat. That’s why we’ve been assuming from the beginning that this is supposed to be long-term, stable housing and not a temporary solution.”

Romodrom

On the other hand, **Housing Ready** – which is sometimes called “permeable” housing – may be particularly suitable for younger clients who still lack an anchor in life and transitional housing will give them time to mature personally and to organise their priorities in life. For example, this is how the Assistance organisation rents a large flat for people with disabilities to share.

“They [the clients] often arrive after their studies are over, after they have left the boarding house or often training housing (...) or when they move to college. They get in and they need to be closer. And then they all moved into city flats or flats from the city ward. I’d say that nobody went back to the family they came from (...) This is a stepping stone so that you can try out what it’s like, see what you can do on your own, what you need someone for. And then there’s a period of waiting for what they desire to come.”

Assistance

It is worth noting that although this is a case of Housing Ready, clients are given a contract for an indefinite term.

“I know that we considered a lot at the beginning whether we or not would give the clients a limited-time contract, we eventually left it unlimited so as not to put pressure on those people again, as everyone would move at a pace they individually needed. But it turns out that after a year in the flat, everyone wants to address the housing issue and move on again. The way everyone is there at a similar stage in their lives, it more or less always works out that they go somewhere else within three years.”

Assistance

Housing Ready, provided in the form of a halfway house (supported housing for young refugees), is also operated in Prague by the Organisation for Aid to Refugees. Here, young foreigners can find ways to spend their free time as well as support for their integration into society. As this service is in high demand due to the ongoing war in Ukraine, the organisation currently only provides it for a shorter period, but with the possibility of extension.

“We used to provide one-year contracts with the option to extend them afterwards, but now we only provide six-month contracts. After six months, we do a review to see if the extension makes sense and if the client needs it. And also to see whether there is a different client who is in a much more critical situation. This is now also being taken into account.”

Organisation for Aid to Refugees

Renadi, a Brno-based company, has a different target group. It provides aftercare Housing Ready to clients recovering from addiction. Here, too, their clients enter into six-month contracts.

“The contract is for half a year, but then we talk, and at least two months before the contract terminates both parties should know if they want to keep co-operating, on what they want to co-operate, and then the client only needs to ask for the extension. The contract gets extended for additional six months.”

Renadi

Although aftercare flats are only a temporary type of housing, the client should strengthen their life of abstinence there and increase their ability to obtain further housing. The organisation’s staff provides its clients with assistance in applying for municipal flats, or they point the clients to other residential services, or motivate them to seek commercial rent and even share it with a roommate to lower the costs.

18. Funding of settling-in activities

Organisations raise funds to set up and run settling-in projects in various ways. They often combine funding sources as needed to ensure sustainability. In this chapter, we present the most common forms of funding.

Some of the entities are based on public funding. For example, the Municipal Rental Agency is a contributory organisation founded directly by the Capital City of Prague, which fully funds its operation. Many organisations are part of the network of social services at the regional or national level. This allows them to use public funds for at least some of their settling-in activities.

Very often, organisations also use grant project funding, which allows them to hire more staff or even bring in funds that can be used for the acquisition or renovation of real estate. Participants in the survey named a variety of sources, ranging from small grants provided by municipalities, to grants from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Regional Development, or the Office of the Government (subsidy programme Prevention of Social Exclusion and Community Work), to European grants from the ESF OPE (for salaries), IROP (renovation of flats), or the International Visegrad Fund. The advantage of such funding is the opportunity to further develop the services; however, its major disadvantages are uncertainty and lack of guarantee of long-term operation.

“As far as finances are concerned, it’s not good. The worst part of it all is that the uncertainty is there every year. We just don’t know how much money we’ll have.”

Práh Southern Moravia

“We should get the subsidy for the social services staff in April, I believe. But where am I supposed to get the money [until then]? I don’t have it. I’m an employee – a director, but I don’t make fifty grand a month. These are obstacles like these. The worst is to manage the cash flow somehow, when you [...] have nothing to rely on.”

St. Agnes Home

Combined funding can sometimes create potentially problematic situations in the work team, as staff paid based on grant projects usually have higher salaries than others.

Organisations also receive support from foundations (Committee of Good Will – Olga Havel Foundation, Via Foundation, AGROFERT Foundation), or fundraise through benefit concerts, events and donations.

Another source of funding is the associated secondary economic activity or social entrepreneurship (workshops, cafés, accredited training courses, etc.). Organisations can then also use contributions to support employment of people with disabilities.¹⁰⁶

The creation of the Affordable Housing Fund was initiated by Jan Beneš, who originally took out mortgage loans for several flats, which he then paid off with the rent. Today, the Fund uses several forms of funding in addition to donations, including loans with a 3% interest per annum. Its funding is thus completely independent of state and European financing.

19. Obstacles and risks

All the entities included in our survey are, in their opinion, successful in finding and helping to maintain housing for people from their target groups. However, even successful organisations face many obstacles and challenges, which we present in this chapter. For better orientation we distinguish several groups of obstacles:

¹⁰⁶ On the basis of an agreement with the Labour Office, it is possible to receive the contribution towards establishing a job reserved for a person with a disability or a contribution to support employment of people with disabilities as a partial payment of the salary costs. These contributions are regulated by the provisions of Section 75 et seq. of Act No 435/2004 Coll., on employment.

- » systemic obstacles;
- » obstacles on the part of the organisation;
- » obstacles on the part of institutions and society; and
- » risk factors on the client's side.

19.1 SYSTEMIC OBSTACLES

By systemic obstacles, we mean primarily those that arise from applicable legislation. First and foremost, Czechia lacks a housing law that would provide a clear framework for settling-in activities and clearly define the obligations and responsibilities of individual actors (municipality, client, social worker, etc.). Without this framework, settling-in activities are usually organised from below and often depend on the personal commitment of individual actors.

“We lack an affordable housing law. The municipalities that are more engaged in this issue are trying to find their own mechanisms, each in its own way. There is no uniform approach. So, our experience is that there is always some plan in the making but, in the meantime, these people are still being excluded and segregated. The process is constantly progressing and these people, especially from Roma communities, are moving into smaller and smaller towns and more and more to the periphery. This situation has been going on here for 30 years.”

Community Work Centre in Western Bohemia

Part of the settling-in activities could benefit from the project titled “Support for social housing and its systemic implementation in the Czech Republic” launched by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. As part of its methodological support to settling-in projects, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs shares examples of good practice, develops methodological materials and organises various educational events, including webinars.¹⁰⁷ This support can thus be used not only by the organisations directly involved in the social housing support project, but also by others.

Nevertheless, many organisations perceive that state provides little support for settling-in activities and see their own work as a substitute for its duties.

“When non-profits started to serve as a kind of outsourced providers of public services, the civic platform disappeared. I’m guessing that today, around 90% of the social services that used to be provided by the State and public administration are covered by the non-profit sector. But it’s no longer the kind of civic NGO, it’s a completely different thing. I think it’s too much. We are technically still an NGO, but in reality, we serve as a governmental [agency].”

R-Mosty

According to the survey participants, the lack of a legal framework poses a fundamental systemic obstacle for the housing of people from vulnerable groups.

Other systemic problems include inappropriately set subsidy titles that threaten the organisations’ funding. For example, if organisations learn the result of a subsidy procedure very late in the process it can put them in very dangerous situations.

¹⁰⁷ Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs [MoLSA]. Social Housing. Online. Available (in Czech) at: <https://socialni bydleni.mpsv.cz/>.

“The Ministry of Education is the main culprit in this. It’s common that they tell you the results of a subsidy procedure for a particular year in November of that year. I’m not kidding. And imagine having to trust them that you’re going to get the money, so you can pay your people. And when you find out in November that you didn’t get the money, you’re a million or two short. And that almost puts you in jail, because it is technically irresponsible – where did you get the money for the salaries?”

R-Mosty

The risk of early termination of a project entails a number of risks not only for the organisation, but also for all stakeholders. In particular, the (sub)lease agreement is only rarely concluded in view of the term of the project. With its termination, the client may be left without the helping organisation’s necessary support, and the owner of the flat loses the organisation’s services and guarantees. In extreme cases, this situation may lead to the termination of the (sub)lease agreement and the client may lose their housing.

“Because, of course, a project like this is challenging in that once you jump in and are serious about it, you make a long-term commitment. And to consider that we don’t have the money now and that the project has to end, we’d have to spend six months to deal with all the lease relationships individually. And what should we tell the owners? ‘We can no longer support you. But you have a lease contract with this guy. Will you terminate it? Should we deal with the eviction of the person? Are you willing to rent the flat to them even if we’re not here?’”

Community Work Centre in Western Bohemia

Functioning of some organisations was also affected by “Lex Babiš”, a legislative amendment tightening the Conflict of Interest Act¹⁰⁸, which, among other things, restricts the provision of subsidies to companies where public officials operate (such as municipal councillors). Similarly, the de minimis support rule, i.e. limits set for the use of State aid (e.g. in the form of subsidies)¹⁰⁹, make funding more complicated due to the personal links between organisations. The limits for the use of State aid also include all organisations linked to the subsidy applicant. Due to the complexity of the rules, organisations are uncertain how to proceed.

“Since Lex Babiš, the biggest problem now is that everyone in the benevolent society is newly a beneficial owner, which means that everyone is linked to everyone... We created the Pomoc association, which is the founder of the foundation... It’s got eighteen people, who are members of the original association, and it’s the founder of St Agnes Home, workshops, ... social housing, homes, nursing services. Now we are all linked as beneficial owners, but since nobody really understands the matter, there is a terrible mess. The same happens with the de minimis rule. We don’t really know what to do because now I don’t know if the de minimis allows the linkage or not, and if the link goes through these people or not. The third problem that made us ineligible for a lot of things is that the founder of the St Agnes Home is the municipality.”

St. Agnes Home

These systemic obstacles in many cases threaten the organisations’ funding or cash flow, and directly threaten their longer-term functioning. However, the stability of these entities is crucial in the area of housing support, because interruption of the project can both endanger the client’s housing and violate the rights of the property owners who provided the flats. This may also jeopardise future settling-in activities, as flat owners may perceive the helping organisations as unstable and therefore risky in the longer term, and significantly reduce the willingness of the owners to provide flats for settling-in projects.

108 Act No. 159/2006 Coll., on conflict of interests.

109 Act No. 215/2004 Coll., on regulation of certain relationships in the area of State aid and on amendment to the Support for Research and Development Act.

19.2 OBSTACLES ON THE PART OF INSTITUTIONS AND SOCIETY

Problems that can be put into the category of **contextual obstacles** usually play a more fundamental role. We understand them as the mistakes or failures of the other entities significantly involved in settling-in activities. Firstly, this includes deficiencies in the Labour Office's activities. Although some of the survey participants praise the co-operation with a particular workplace of the Labour Office, it is much more common that they experience delays in the processing of benefits. However, clients need the benefits to finance their housing. Delayed benefit payments place additional demands on helping organisations, such as the use of guarantee funds to cover shortfalls in benefit payments.

"We're waiting, yes, so we actually serve as a financial cushion for the Labour Office. But I'd say it's really quite a systemic failure, because otherwise the benefits can almost pay the full [rent] [...] Basically, we keep things going before they send the money. I did the math today and I think we'd have had [due to late benefit payments] about eight terminated contracts if we had complied with the three outstanding rent payments that we retained..."

Municipal Rental Agency

Another problem is the inconsistent procedure of the contact points of the Labour Office, for example, when deciding on the benefit for extraordinary immediate assistance for the purpose of covering the cost of a security deposit.

"We arranged the flat, managed to get it, and now of course we needed the Labour Office to co-operate and quickly approve the housing benefits, child benefits and benefits for the security deposit we negotiated for the lady. But the Labour Office's statement was that the lady was not entitled to the full security deposit because the prices of the flats were different and that they simply couldn't give it to her, so they would only give her a part of it. The deposit was CZK 20,000 and they said they'd only give her 14,000. The official statement came after three weeks. We had to read the methodological instruction of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs on security deposits and on the allocation of these extraordinary benefits for security deposits, which the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs issued to the Labour Offices as an instruction on how to proceed. There it was clearly written that they were to provide the entire security deposit, that they could give the people up to three months' rent."

Community Work Centre in Western Bohemia

However, delayed benefit payments and inconsistency are not the only problems mentioned by the participants in relation to the Labour Office. For example, bad experience related to prejudiced behaviour of the officials was reported by employees of the Organisation for Aid to Refugees.

"It was crazy. A dark-skinned Asian girl gets discriminated since she walks in the building. I talked the official into at least listening to her situation, to at least let us fill out applications, if nothing else. So, we went in there. She lectured me and the girl that the Czech system only cares about Czech citizens. Okay, I tell her, but she's a refugee and she's entitled to it anyway. In the end, she didn't even let us fill out the applications. Then I complained to the head of the Labour Office [...]"

Organisation for Aid to Refugees

For example, the Práh organisation carries out activities that to combat prejudices among Labour Office staff. It established co-operation with the Labour Office and explained to its staff the problems associated with the communication with their target group (people who experienced mental illness).

"For example, at the Labour Office at [street name], where the benefits in material need are processed, we know who is easier to communicate with, who supports us, with whom we can consult things. We've got some ties to the staff there. There even might have been some group

meeting where we gave a training or a lecture about our target group, how to communicate with our clients, so that the employees would learn something and weren't afraid to turn to us if they needed to."

Práh Southern Moravia

Prejudice is a significant contextual obstacle in general, not just at the Labour Office. Participants in the survey testified that their clients, especially Roma people and people of colour in general, encounter rejection on grounds of their race or ethnicity.

"...in our opinion, it's far too easy in practice to kick the Roma client out of the flat viewing simply because they are dark-skinned, so they won't get the flat. Which isn't to take away any private landlord's right to rent their flat to whomever they want. [...] But it's really easy to turn someone away by asking them straight out: 'Are you Roma?' or 'I think your name sounds Romani...' And not only this doesn't get punished, it's even perfectly socially acceptable. Because it's just normal."

R-Mosty

They also face prejudice from their new neighbours. Although complaints against the clients are in some cases justified (and our staff actively addresses them with all parties involved), other times they have been proven to be fabricated and part of undisguised bullying by their neighbours.

"For example, this client was dealing with the fact that there was a mess in the hallway and they [the neighbours] blamed it on him. But he didn't feel responsible for it, so we organised some kind of a meeting in the building or on that floor and we talked it out with the neighbours. We try to communicate a lot with these people, preferably as a precautionary measure when we know about something. Otherwise, we react to the actual problem."

Vavřinec

"And what helped quite a lot was that the owner and I talked about it for a really long time and [...] she was the first one to say: 'I think it's bullying. That's not how they would treat other people.' Because they thought [...] that it looks like in Chanov here, that they have curtains hung outside all the time... Because the lady actually washes her curtains every Thursday [...] And so we let the owner figure out on her own that this is bullying, that this is simply not how they would treat anybody else, and then we came up with a plan: 'Okay, but I want to go there, I want to see it with my own eyes and make my own opinion about it.' And then she saw that really everything in that flat was absolutely fine and that the family [...] was well-behaved."

Municipal Rental Agency

19.3 RISK FACTORS ON THE CLIENT'S SIDE

The last category of issues are the **client-side obstacles**. Helping organisations naturally expect that many of their clients have specific needs and problems and are prepared to help them effectively.

"We're trying to do our best to make this thing work. And only when the client repeatedly proves that they are unable to co-operate ... it usually ends with the person not communicating with us. As long as they communicate and try to inform us about their problems and there is at least a rudimentary effort to solve the problems, we always try. If we are able to sit at the same table with them, talk about things and figure out some kind of a solution, we usually manage to keep it going. It ends only when our attempts to bring them to the table prove futile."

Community Work Centre in Western Bohemia

Different target groups deal with different risks (relapse of addiction or disease, mismanagement of resources, pathological relationships, etc.). Serious obstacles on the part of the client involve mainly the failure to comply with agreements with all stakeholders, not paying their rent (without communicating this inability to pay debts with the staff of the helping organisations) or the constant violation of the rules of cohabitation with the neighbours.

Participants also identified “taking the street home” as a barrier in people with a history of homelessness. This describes a situation where clients essentially continue to live “on the street” even within their new housing. Major problems often arise due to violent partners of female clients, new undocumented persons moving into the flat (without consulting the parties) and substance abuse. In most cases, all these problems can be solved. On the other hand, a major obstacle is the clients’ clear lack of interest in the settling-in service, which may become apparent very soon.

“The client stayed [in the flat] for three days and then she returned to the residential hostel because she ‘wouldn’t travel across the town to see her relatives’. So, she returned to the hostel without telling anyone, we were looking for her, could not contact her at all. (...) The girls went to the hostel and she said: ‘Look, I don’t really want your flat.’ (...) So, not everyone is suitable for settling in, not everyone wants it.”

Vavřinec

It is necessary to accept that the client is not prepared for a change or that they have a different idea of housing. For many people accustomed to non-standard forms of housing, living in a flat can be associated with loneliness to which they are not accustomed.

“Sometimes there are ladies who do not thrive in a flat. They can’t stay there. They really just feel better on the street. It’s more of a trauma for them to be there alone. They go back to the hostel because they need people around them. They aren’t so lonely there.”

Jako Doma – Homelike

This recognition is also part of good practice – to realise that not every service or form of help is suitable for everyone. Insisting on a different solution in some cases makes no sense and would not only fail to help a particular client, but also jeopardise the reputation of the helping organisations.

20. Evaluation of the success of settling-in activities

We also asked the participants how they evaluate the success of their activities. In this chapter, we briefly outline how the organisations evaluate their work.

Each of the organisations has its own system for evaluating success. Those that are funded by projects usually document the exact number of families or clients settled in per year, or other indicators depending on the requirements of the project. They also usually publish accurate information in their annual reports. However, we will also focus on a more general evaluation of the success of their activities. What can we actually call a success?

“For me, success is when they stay in that flat for a long time and function in a somewhat normal way, at least from our point of view. When their children go to school, they are getting healthcare, their parents take proper care of them, when we manage to employ the parents – we have such cases too. The criteria are different, because it’s just different for each household – you have to take into account the input indicators, the starting point, and each household is completely different in this regard. So, it’s hard for me to evaluate.”

Vavřinec

For the target group of people who experienced mental illness, we can also consider it a success that they are able to live with some degree of support outside of hospitals or institutional facilities.

“I also consider it a success if the client stays in our protected housing, if they master the basic skills there, if they go without hospitalisation for a longer period of time. Especially people who I know have really been in the hospital for a long time or have been hospitalised repeatedly. They’d be at home for a month or two, then six months in the hospital, and it went on like that for several years. When they spend a year or two with us, I consider it a success.”

Práh Southern Moravia

Other survey participants distinguish between measurable evaluations, the “hard data” regularly required by project funders and grant providers, and self-evaluations, the “soft data”, which allow for the assessment of long-term shifts in a client’s quality of life.

“In the last seven or eight years, I see a huge shift. I can see the impact in visiting the family. At the beginning there was distrust, it was all very defensive: ‘what I wouldn’t tell them, what nobody should know’. But now it’s about a partnership not only with me but also regarding the surroundings, that this person actually invites me for coffee, not because they want to deal with some problem over the coffee. I say: ‘You needed something.’ ‘No, I wanted to share with you that I have a new job.’ And to me this is a beautiful shift that is already visible to me. I’m talking about a particular Mr. Z., who raised a boy in that household who attended a standard school.”

Romodrom

This “soft data”, illustrated by specific stories of the clients, are sometimes published by organisations on their websites to show good practice. If we want more accurate results, in most organisations the success rate (i.e. the clients successfully settling in) is usually around 80-90% according to their statements.

“There is always a client who fails, nothing is perfect, but the ‘dropout rate’, as they say, is quite low. The number of clients that don’t make it is about 10%, or between 10 and 15%. The remaining clients keep the housing in the long term. So we can say that we have almost 80 or 90% success rate.”

Romodrom

On the one hand, these numbers appear very encouraging. They prove to us that the organisations’ practices are effective and that most of their clients obtain and maintain housing in the long term thanks to them. On the other hand, however, it is important to note that the high success rate only applies to the clients of the organisations. Due to a limited capacity, a significant number of people in need will not become their clients. For this reason, we surveyed the participants to find out what their capacity is and how they are managing to meet the demand in the region for a particular target group.

The survey found that most organisations are facing so much demand that they are not able to satisfy everyone who is interested. The limitation in many cases is the lack of staff capacity rather than, for example, a lack of housing.

“It was fixed at fifty [flats], then they agreed that we could go up to seventy after we were successful and the offers started coming in. But there we ran into problems with our internal processes and capacities. Four people [...], just aren’t enough to handle such a workload.”

Municipal Rental Agency

The situation also varies for different target groups. Representatives of the Organisation for Aid to Refugees probably perceive the greatest disproportion between demand and supply. They note that the proportion of young foreigners who cannot be assisted with housing for capacity reasons is high.

“I think that we satisfy about 2% [of those interested].”

Organisation for Aid to Refugees

However, significant excess of demand was also reported by the vast majority of the survey participants from organisations that focus on other target groups (people recovering from addictions, Roma people, people who experienced mental illness).

“The current situation is that we have maybe ten applications from women and around eight applications from men as of today. And the moment when person is coming up in the list is totally random. It’s really difficult for those people, which we understand but we can’t do anything about it, because if a person is third on the waiting list, they could very well come up in January, or we might not contact them for another two months.”

Renadi

“... I handle new calls, [...] it’s maybe five new applicants every week. We’re constantly getting inquiries that they want to fill out an application with us, that they heard that we’re helping with housing, that they’re in acute need right now and they’ don’t have a place to live, are completely homeless – and we’re not keeping up with the demand...”

Romodrom

“We can’t help everybody at the same time, so the waiting time is different for every person who isn’t on our waiting list and has to wait for a place. It depends again on how we manage to move the people who are already there, so some people wait for a year and some people wait for two years, which is a really long time.”

Práh Southern Moravia

Conclusion

— The organisations' good practice is a set of work procedures and methods that are effective in the settling in of vulnerable people. The dissemination and promotion of this know-how can contribute to improving the accessibility of housing for people from vulnerable groups.

Organisations cited the lack of a law on social housing as the main systemic obstacle. The government has responded to this shortcoming by drafting a bill on housing support. As far as the provision of housing is concerned, the draft is based on the voluntary principle, so it does not oblige anyone to provide housing to those in need, not even municipalities. On the other hand, the bill is based on the experience of organisations that already provide housing support without a legal framework. The bill contains a number of tools that have proven to be useful in practice, such as guarantees for landlords and support for families in settling in.

The sponsors of the bill say it could help up to 1.6 million people at risk of housing need and will reduce the number of people in housing need by at least 30% over ten years.¹¹⁰ However, only practice will tell whether the functional mechanisms can be successfully transferred from small teams of helping organisations to a national system and achieve this goal. The organisations' experience shows that providing people with sufficient settling-in support and at the same time providing landlords with sufficient guarantees can reduce the number of people in housing need. This is a benefit not only for the people themselves, but also for the society as a whole.

“Now you go there and you see the joy in their eyes and you know that they are people who are actually able to pay their rent [...] You have people who get a disability pension, around eleven thousand crowns, and they earn additional eleven thousand with us [...] They can pay the rent, they can go shopping and get by, go to a restaurant, and they can almost establish relationships [...] Suddenly you have a person who is putting that money back into the economy, paying taxes and is not just someone who is locked up somewhere with all of us paying for them. I don't want to say it, I know that for a lot of people it's not really possible, that their disabilities don't allow it. But as I say: you can do it if you really want to.”

Práh Southern Moravia

¹¹⁰ Ministry of Regional Development [MoRD]. Law on housing support. Online. Available (in Czech) at: <https://mmr.gov.cz/cs/ministerstvo/bytova-politika/bydleni-jako-jedna-z-hlavnich-priorit-vlady/zakon-o-podpore-v-bydleni> [retrieved on 2023-12-06].

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