

Norwegian Social Housing Policy: Fragmented & Coordinated

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Abstract

The diverse and fragmented field of Norwegian municipal social housing policy is analysed in this paper. Following the lead of a recent quantitative study and our own comprehensive qualitative examination of 22 municipalities, we highlight the challenges connected to the fragmented organisation of housing policy in most local polities. Furthermore, we point to the various strategies of coordination which are employed to overcome these challenges. The paper supplements and qualifies the criticisms of a recent evaluation of municipal housing policies in Norway (The Office of the Auditor General of Norway 2008), and is meant as a contribution to the debate on the organisation of social housing policy throughout Europe. Furthermore, the paper adds to the international literature on policy coordination between different bodies of government.

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Introduction

Various authors have rightly indicated that the organisational structure of Norwegian municipal “social housing policy” (Nordvik & Whitehead 2008), defined as a policy directed at providing adequate housing for disadvantaged groups, is diverse and fragmented (Hansen & Åhrén 1991; Ytrehus 2002; Myrvold et al. 2002; Langsether 2005; Medby & Langsether 2007; Langsether & Skårberg 2007). However, this paper gives a more correct and detailed picture than any of the studies mentioned above. Whereas previous studies have been restricted to one or a couple of policy instruments or focused on just a few cases, the conclusions of this paper are based on a quantitative survey of 313 out of 430 municipalities (Rambøll Management 2008) as well as our own qualitative study of 22 local polities (Langsether, Hansen & Sørvoll 2008). On the basis of this comprehensive empirical material we claim that the organisation of social housing policy can be described as diverse, because the variation between municipalities is immense. Furthermore, we conclude that the organisation of social housing policy can be described as fragmented, since strategy, planning and the administration of policy instruments in most cases are split between many different municipal bodies. Our qualitative study shows that this fragmented organisational structure often creates problems for the municipal authorities involved in social housing policy. These problems include cost-shifting games and insufficient coordination between municipal bodies to the detriment of underprivileged households. On the other hand, the qualitative interviews we conducted show that many municipalities employ strategies of coordination to overcome these challenges (Langsether et al. 2008).

The main aim of this paper is to present and discuss the fragmentation and coordination of Norwegian social housing policy. We believe these topics are highly relevant for the discussion on the merits of social housing policy in Norway (Barlindhaug & Astrup 2008; The Office of the Auditor General of Norway 2008), and the debate on the optimal employment and organisation of social policy instruments throughout Europe. Furthermore, this paper is also a contribution to the international literature on policy coordination between different bodies of government (Øverbye 2009).

In accordance with the aims of the paper outlined above we attempt to answer the following questions in what follows: Firstly, why is municipal social housing policy a diverse and fragmented field? Secondly, what are the problems and challenges connected with this fragmented structure? Thirdly, which strategies of coordination have been used to overcome

these challenges in the municipalities? Finally, we ask which reforms should be implemented by municipalities which are in the process of reorganising their social housing policy.

In the two first sections of the paper we discuss the restructuring of Norwegian housing in the years from 1980 to 2008, and present an outline of the main tools of the contemporary municipal social housing policy. An overview of the fragmented nature of housing policies in the municipalities is the topic of the next section. After this presentation we turn our attention to the paper's main research questions. Finally, in the paper's concluding section, we put forward several policy recommendations.

The restructuring of Norwegian housing policy 1980-2008

European housing policies have been thoroughly restructured over the course of the last thirty years (Doherty 2004). The Norwegian case is no exception. One can even plausibly claim that Norwegian housing policy has been revolutionised. The post-war housing policies of Norway's two Scandinavian neighbours, Sweden and Denmark, have for instance proved more resilient to the forces of institutional change (Bengtsson ed. 2006). From 1945 to the 1980s Norwegian housing policy was dominated by brick and mortar subsidies for mass-construction and various constraints on market forces. In the 80s and 90s this policy from the years of "Social Democratic hegemony" (Sassoon 1996) was transformed. At the present time virtually all rent controls and subsidies for mass-construction have been abolished. Broadly speaking, a universal policy aimed at all sections of society has been replaced with a housing policy that is targeted at underprivileged groups (NOU 2002:2). Somewhat simplified, one can say that the overriding focus of policy has shifted to the poor, ill, homeless and elderly. Thus, social housing for the poor and marginalised and means-tested housing allowance have become the most important instruments of housing policy. Furthermore, the linkages between homelessness, housing policy and the fight against poverty has increasingly been emphasised in the policy discourse of Norwegian governments (Sørvoll 2009). Today the overriding goal of Norwegian housing policy is to enable all households to obtain adequate dwellings in safe environments. In addition, official policy goals include promotion of well functioning housing markets and home ownership (St. meld. nr. 23 2002-2003).

Many commentators have criticised what one scholar has called the "neoliberal shift" (Skeie 2004) of Norwegian housing policy. According to widespread opinion the state has withdrawn from the housing sector, and any housing policy worthy of the name disappeared during the course of the 80s and 90s (Rolness 2000; Lysestøl & Eilertsen 2001; Marsdal 2007; Stamsø

2009). Although it is not our intention to defend all the policy changes over the last years, the critics tend to neglect four important aspects which are relevant to the contemporary public debate on the merits of housing policy. Firstly, they are prone to overlook the claim that the homeless and other vulnerable groups are better served by the restructured policy of recent years, than by the universal strategy of old (Nordvik & Sandlie 2009). It is of course possible to question this claim, for instance on the grounds that the recipients of means-tested benefits are stigmatised, or because one believes the state still does far too little to help vulnerable groups in the housing sector. For instance, most local authorities report that the stock of public rented housing at their disposal is not sufficient to meet the needs of underprivileged households. Recently, some studies have also drawn attention to the fact that many, who are not able to obtain adequate housing on the free market, do not satisfy the criteria for any of the instruments of social housing policy (Sandlie & Nordvik 2009). Furthermore, the proportion of Norwegian households that receive housing allowances is much lower than in Sweden and Denmark (NOU 2002:2). Thus, it is possible to argue that Norwegian social housing policy is limited in several ways. When that is said, it seems hard to dispute the claim that the Norwegian state does more to provide underprivileged groups with adequate housing than ever before in its history. This is reflected in recent projects that aim to combat homelessness and the increased focus on providing services to tenants in social housing (Ytrehus et al. 2007). In our view, therefore, the Norwegian state has not only retreated in the last years, but also expanded its reach in key areas of housing policy. Another example of state roll out is the expansion of legal frameworks in several parts of the housing sector over the last twenty years (Kiøsterud 2005).

Our line of argument here is consistent with the analysis put forward in an article by Joe Doherty (2004) in the *European Journal of Housing Policy*. In this article Doherty summarises the main conclusions of several studies, which emphasise that the changes in European housing policies since the 80s can not simply be interpreted as a process of state withdrawal.

Secondly, although the development in housing policy from 1980 to 2008 in many ways was a break with past (Sørvoll 2008), the critical commentators tend to exaggerate change at the expense of substantial continuities. The most important continuity is probably the strong emphasis on the promotion of home ownership throughout the last sixty years. Whereas the policy of the first decades after the Second World War promoted home ownership through general subsidies, the current housing policy attempts to spread the perceived merits of home ownership to low-income households. This Norwegian bias towards

owner occupation is reflected in a high rate of home ownership; today nearly 80 percent own their own home. In contrast with Sweden and Denmark, where public rented housing accounts for around 20 percent of the housing stock, social housing only make up 4 percent of all housing in Norway. Furthermore, whereas Swedish and Danish public rented housing, at least in principle, is aimed at all sections of society (Elander 1991; Vestergaard 2004), Norwegian social housing is only open to low-income households, the elderly or the disabled.

Thirdly, the critics often glorify the housing policy from the “golden years of Social Democracy” (1945-75). Clearly, the policies of the post-war years contributed to the mass-construction of adequate and affordable housing for most sections of Norwegian society. However, there were many problems connected to the subsidies and regulations of the past (Gulbrandsen & Torgersen 1981; Nordby 1990). The best example is probably the rules and regulations in the cooperative sector that produced unintended consequences that were detrimental to underprivileged groups (Gulbrandsen 1980). In addition, the taxation and subsidy regime of the “golden age” were most favourable towards well-to-do households (Wessel 1987).

Finally, and most important for our present purposes, the critics of the “neoliberal shift” at best pay insufficient attention to the important role of the municipal level of government in the implementation of housing policy. Arguably, the municipalities increased their relative importance in Norwegian housing policy after the restructuring of the 80s and 90s (Langsether et al. 2008). At the present time the Norwegian central government formulates the main goals and constructs the legal framework of housing policy, and through the public Housing Bank it provides housing allowance, grants for groups with special needs and so-called start-up loans intended for first-time buyers and others who are not able to obtain a mortgage from a private bank. Furthermore, the state contributes financially to the construction of municipal social housing. However, the municipalities are the primary implementers of housing policy in Norway (Langsether et al. 2008).

The role of the municipalities in social housing policy

The municipalities are the level of government most directly involved with providing adequate housing for disadvantaged groups. These disadvantaged groups are in many cases synonymous with low-income households. However, this is not necessarily the case. Some disadvantaged groups may for example be elderly or immigrants, whose chief problem is difficulty getting access to housing in the private rental market. Other underprivileged groups

are first and foremost characterised by drug- or mental problems. Finally, some vulnerable groups are primarily the victims of the lack of individual skill and low information about the opportunities in local housing markets (Hansen & Åhrén 1991). Numerically the underprivileged groups in question are few compared to the majority of the population. Recent figures suggest that approximately 15 percent of the population at any given time, benefits from one or more of the tools of social housing policy (Hansen 2004).

In our view, it is useful to distinguish between the authority of municipalities in social housing policy on the level of strategy and the level of policy implementation. The responsibilities of municipalities at the level of strategy include formulation of policy goals, planning, evaluation and institutional design. The coordination of various policy instruments and the different bodies involved in social housing policy, are also a part of the local authorities responsibility at the level of strategy (Langsether et al. 2008). The responsibilities of municipalities at the level of policy implementation are outlined in what follows.

According to the law of social services the municipalities are responsible for helping groups who are unable to fend for themselves in the markets for owner-occupied or privately rented housing. The instructions in the law regarding social housing policy put limited, but clear responsibilities on the shoulders of municipalities. Firstly, the law states that municipalities should give income support to people who are not able to cover their living expenses, including the cost of rent, heating and temporary loans. In addition, the law states that the municipalities are to provide temporary shelter to groups who are unable to satisfy their own short-term housing needs. This temporary shelter is often provided in the form of a room in a hostel or hotel paid for by the local authorities (Langsether et al. 2008).

Norwegian municipalities also help administer and promote the policy instruments financed by the state, like housing allowance, grants and start-up loans. These selective policy instruments are meant to secure adequate dwellings in good environments for underprivileged groups and promote home ownership among low-income households. Approximately 100 000 households receive housing allowance. Recently, however, rather strict household and dwelling criteria connected with the state's housing allowance were somewhat broadened. This means that an additional 40-50 000 low-income households have become eligible (St. prp. nr. 11 2008-2009). The municipal authorities are responsible for ensuring that all eligible inhabitants within their borders receive housing allowance. Furthermore, they are expected to make sure that the applications for housing allowance satisfy the State's Housing Bank's requirements (Østerby 2007). In some cases the municipalities themselves finance a

supplementary housing allowance, which typically is received by the most underprivileged tenants in the public sector (Langsether et al. 2008).

As previously mentioned, start-up loans are given to first-time buyers and other groups who are unable to obtain funding from private banks. Start-up loans are lightly subsidised by the state, but are distributed and granted by the municipal authorities. The municipalities are responsible for the start-ups and must cover the expenses of loans that are not repaid. Although the State's Housing Bank passes down some broad guidelines, the municipalities are free to decide the size of the start-up loans and who receives them (Sandlie & Nordvik 2009).

Grants for the purchasing, rehabilitation or refinancing of housing are only given to the poorest members of society. The municipalities apply to the Housing Bank for funds towards grants, and are responsible for distributing grants to applicants according to their own independent judgements. In general the local authorities give grants to people in combination with housing allowance and start-up loans (Langsether et al. 2008).

Public rented or social housing to the elderly, disabled, poor and other marginalised groups is also provided by the local authorities. Although social housing is generally considered the most important tool of housing policy by the local authorities themselves, this sector has been somewhat neglected by the Norwegian governments in the post-war era (Langsether et al. 2008). Recent housing policy white papers do, for instance, not deal with this sector in much detail (NOU 2002:2; St. meld. 23 2003-04). This reflects the fact that social rented housing, as previously mentioned, is a residual sector in Norway. The sector only makes up 4 percent of the total housing stock. Furthermore, if one excludes dwellings intended for elderly, disabled and employees in local government, one is left with an even smaller sector of "pure" social housing. This pure form of social housing, roughly 1.5 percent of the housing stock, is offered to low-income households (Dyb 2007). The differences between municipalities when it comes to the size and form of the pure social housing sector are immense. For instance, the method of rent determination varies greatly and is decided by local councils (Medby & Langsether 2007). The criteria and methods for the allocation of apartments in public rented housing are also different from municipality to municipality (Langsether & Skårberg 2007). These differences reflect the large degree of local freedom in social housing policy. On the other hand, there is also one important commonality between the stocks of housing reserved for low-income households in the municipalities: All contracts in the pure form of social housing are usually temporary, they typically last three or five years. When contracts are close to their date of termination the municipal authority is

supposed to reassess the economic status of households. Some, which have bettered their financial situation over the course of the three or five year period, are given grants and start-up loans in order to purchase their own home, other households are given new three year contracts in the social housing sector (Langsether et. al 2008).

Finally, the municipalities provide various forms of services to people with special needs, typically occupiers of public rented housing. These services are often allocated in combination with a short term contract to an apartment in the social housing sector. The groups that receive assistance from the local authorities are not fully equipped to live on their own. Tenants with drug, alcohol or mental problems are among the groups that are frequently helped by municipalities. These groups may need economic and legal advice, or need help socialising and cleaning their apartments. Some municipalities provide a whole range of services that cater to such needs. However, the municipalities are free to decide the shape and scope of the services. As one would expect, therefore, the form of these services varies greatly across the municipalities (Skog Hansen et. al. 2007).

The fragmented organisation of housing policy

In the introduction of the paper we wrote that the organisation of social housing policy can be described as diverse, because the variation between municipalities is immense. Despite our best efforts, it has therefore proven difficult, if not impossible, to construct a fruitful typology of organisational models. Furthermore, we wrote that the organisation of social housing policy can be described as fragmented, since strategy, planning and the administration of policy instruments in most cases are split between many different municipal bodies.

We find it useful to distinguish between vertical and horizontal fragmentation. “Horizontal fragmentation” occurs when policy instruments, like the allocation of social housing, start-up loans and housing allowance, are administered by different municipal bodies. It also occurs when the administration of one policy instrument is split between various bodies of local government. In some cases, for instance, the allocation of distinct categories of social housing is split among different municipal bodies. The term “vertical fragmentation” is meant to describe cases where tasks on the level of strategy and the level of implementation connected to the same policy instrument are split between two or more municipal bodies. For example, the decision of buying or building social housing, a task firmly rooted at the level of strategy, and the municipality’s landlord duties, a responsibility

which can be placed on the level of implementation, is frequently not performed by the same administrative body (Langsether et al. 2008).

Although the organisation of social housing policy is diverse, it is possible to highlight some trends. In what follows we will outline some main findings. Readers who are interested in a more detailed picture should consult the table in the appendix of this paper. In this table we attempt to illustrate the variation and complexity of the organisational structure of municipal housing policy in Norway (Appendix 1, p. 20).

Municipal bodies with names like “Property” and “Technical unit” dominate the construction and maintenance of public rented housing. Some local polities, however, uses semi-independent housing companies for these tasks. On the other hand, special teams with representation from various municipal units dominate the allocation of apartments within the public rented sector. The social services are the most frequently responsible for providing assistance to groups with special needs, and are also often involved in the management of the instruments of housing economics – start-up loans, housing allowances and housing grants. However, the instruments of housing economics are in reality often managed by a small housing office within the social services.

Planning and evaluation is also conducted by a diverse group of administrative units and committees. The primary responsibility for these tasks lies, of course, with the administrative and political leadership in the municipalities. From day to day, however, the responsibility of planning and evaluation often lies with ad-hoc committees or one or more of the administrative bodies involved in social housing policy (Langsether et al 2008).

Causes of variation and fragmentation

When trying to explain the diversity of social housing policy, it is natural to start the inquiry by looking at some characteristics of Norwegian municipalities. Apart from a handful of larger local polities, most municipalities in Norway are quite small. Whereas only 13 municipalities have a population of over 50 000, some 50 percent of all municipalities have a population of less than 5000. One would expect that these smaller polities in general would opt for different organisational structures than the larger municipalities, and that this in turn explains some of the diversity of social housing policy. However, the differences between small and large municipalities are modest, and seem to explain a rather small part of the institutional variation. Still, it can be noted, for instance, that housing companies are more likely to build, own and manage public rented housing in large municipalities, and start-up

loans are more likely to be administered by the social services in the smaller municipalities (Langsether et. al. 2008).

Other characteristics of municipalities, like level of income, geographical region or demographic structure, also seem to account for little of the organisational fragmentation and variation. In our opinion, one must therefore look to a wide range of other factors if one wants to explain the multitude of social housing policy. Firstly, local democracy and strong municipal authority in housing policy surely contributes to the immense institutional variation. Both local politicians and municipal government officials have a large degree of autonomy when it comes to social housing policy. Most importantly for our present purposes, the municipalities are largely free to decide on the organisational structure of policy. This freedom naturally leads to variation in the organisation of social housing policy (Langsether et al. 2008).

Secondly, it is necessary to take in to account that the main services of municipal housing policy satisfy different needs, and can be produced and consumed independently of each other. Therefore, we would argue that there is an inherent possibility that services like start-up loans, housing allowance and public rented housing are administered by different municipal bodies. Housing allowances are for example aimed at people who are not in full employment, whereas start-up loans are targeted at people who have some form of steady income, usually a low-paid full time job (Langsether et al. 2008).

Furthermore, what one may call the two logics of integration probably explains part of the fragmentation and diversity. According to Holm (2007) one can distinguish between two broad models of organisation in the municipalities. In the first model social housing policy is organised as an integrated part of social policy, and has few direct organisational links with the bodies that are responsible for other parts of housing policy. On the other hand, social housing policy is an integrated part of housing policy in the second model. In our view, there are good reasons for adhering to both of these logics or models of integration. One may choose to follow the first model if one is most concerned with the welfare of targeted groups, and is less concerned with the organisational unity of housing policy. For example, many have historically chosen to separate the allocation of public housing between various municipal bodies in accordance with the needs of different groups. The Health services have, for instance, often been responsible for allocating public housing to the elderly. On the other hand, one may be guided by the other model if one is most concerned with uniting different instruments of social housing policy with other areas of housing policy.

Thirdly, the variation and fragmentation of policy must be explained by pointing to important historical legacies. The story of Norwegian social housing policy can be told by highlighting several stages. In each stage a different group of services were established, and the stages have all left their distinct mark on the organisational structure of social housing policy. The roots of the present form of public rented housing can be found in the early 20th century. Housing allowances and start-up loans, on the other hand, are products of the post-war housing policy. The services directed at groups with special needs are of recent origin. This gradual historical trajectory has meant that the instruments of housing policy, unlike other areas of policy, seldom have been organised in one administrative unit. Instead, the different instruments have usually found their separate place in the organisational structure. Thus, the fragmented nature of municipal social housing policy can be seen as a case of path-dependence.

Another substantial historical legacy is the fragmented nature of the state's policies on matters related to housing. Both the agency of Health and Social Services and the ministry of Regional and Municipal Affairs have for example given special funding to the municipalities in order to promote new social housing services. This has led to further fragmentation and variation in social housing policy. To just name one illustrative case: The fact that the agency of Health and Social Services financed the grants for the establishment of services which was to assist tenants with special needs, had the consequence that almost 70 percent of the municipalities that received grants integrated these services in municipal bodies that were responsible for general social policy (Ytrehus et. al 2007).

Finally, it is important to take note of the legacy of different municipal reforms, like reforms inspired by New Public Management (NPM) and the principles of activation and workfare. We believe that these reforms have influenced the organisation of social housing policy more than rational attempts to construct a better policy for underprivileged groups. To name just one example, we could point to the recent NAV-reform which has been implemented without anyone giving much reflection to how it will affect social housing policy. In addition, a part of the variation and fragmentation of social housing policy can be explained by pointing to the different ways municipalities have adjusted to NPM or activation reforms. Due to strong traditions of local democracy Norwegian municipalities are largely free to decide the form and scope of the reforms promoted by organisations or state agencies. The freedom of the municipal authorities, even include the right to decide which reforms are implemented and the administrative units affected by the reforms that are chosen.

Therefore, NPM inspired reforms have contributed to increased variation and fragmentation of social housing policy in the municipalities.

One of the main organisational consequences of NPM inspired reforms is the widespread practice of implementing variations of the two-level model and the separation of the functions of ordering and executing. A rough estimate derived from Rambøll's quantitative and our qualitative study, suggests that approximately 80 percent of Norwegian municipalities have implemented the two-level model and 25 percent have split the functions of ordering and executing (Rambøll Management 2008; Langsether et al. 2008). Municipal governments based on the two-level model are split between one strategic level and many operational units. The strategic level formulates policy goals and evaluates the performances of the operational units. The operational units are responsible for implementing and executing policies within their field. These units are also responsible for reporting to the strategic level about their performance (Kleven 2002; Vabø 2007). However, since social housing policy is a relatively small policy area in most municipalities, it is seldom allocated a separate operational unit. Tromsø, a relatively large municipality in the north of Norway, is one of the rare exceptions that confirm this rule (Langsether et al. 2008)..

When it comes to the separation of the functions of ordering and executing, the effects of this organisational change for social housing policy can be seen in the many cases where the allocating of apartments in the public sector has been separated from the municipality's responsibilities as a landlord. In most municipalities where this organisational change has been implemented the allocation of apartments is done by the social- and health services, and the landlord functions are performed by an administrative unit trusted with the maintenance of the housing stock or a semi-independent housing company. Thus, this NPM inspired practice has led to what we call increased horizontal fragmentation, since it has meant that an increased number of municipal bodies are involved in the administration of social housing policy instruments. However, it may also be noted that not all municipalities have adjusted their organisational models in accordance with the principle of separation between the functions of ordering and executing (Langsether et al. 2008).

NAV is a recent activation or workfare reform that, at least at first glance, has contributed to greater diversity and fragmentation in the organisation of social housing policy. The NAV-reform was launched by the government in 2006 and is still in the process of being implemented. As a consequence of the reform the national insurance and employment administrations were merged and a new agency of work and welfare was established. In addition, the new agency of work and welfare has gone into partnership with the social

services in the municipalities (Kristensen 2008). As a result of these partnerships several of the policy instruments connected to the field of social housing policy has in many cases been moved to the new NAV-offices. This means that yet another administrative body has been added to the multitude of bodies involved in Norwegian social housing policy. However, although the NAV-reform is mandatory the municipalities are free to decide whether they want to move any of the instruments of housing policy to NAV, and in practice some have chosen to keep their existing organisational structure. Thus, the NAV-reform has increased the diversity of social housing policy. The allocation of temporary shelter is the policy instrument that has been most frequently moved to the new NAV-offices. Well over 50 percent of the local polities that participated in Rambøll's survey (2008) stated that they were in the process of moving this instrument to NAV. Housing allowance, start-up loans and housing grants have also often been allocated to NAV. Finally, the new welfare and work agency is involved in the allocation of public housing and services to tenants with special needs. But it usually shares these responsibilities with other municipal bodies (Langsether et al. 2008; See table in Appendix 1).

The challenges of fragmentation

Recently, the Office of the Auditor General (2008) conducted a comprehensive evaluation of Norwegian social housing policy. The fragmented organisational structure of municipal housing policy was criticised in the report that summarises the conclusions of the evaluation. In the report it is pointed out that 30 per cent of the municipalities that were evaluated did not have a body or agency that was responsible for the implementation of social housing policy. Instead, the responsibility for conducting policy was split between many different bodies. According to the Office of the Auditor General (2008), this fragmented structure increases the risk of a housing policy that is badly coordinated, and that fails to take advantage of all the relevant policy instruments to the detriment of disadvantaged groups. To back up their conclusions, the office points to the fact that many municipalities report that they rarely try to be flexible when it comes to the utilisation of different policy instruments. 54 percent of the municipalities that were reviewed state, for example, that they "seldom or never" try to decide whether individuals who are denied a start-up loan should be offered an apartment in the public rented sector. In the view of the Office of the Auditor General, it is a serious failing of Norwegian social housing policy that the most important tool within the field, public rented housing, in many cases is not integrated with the other instruments of the policy area. To

solve these and other problems the office recommends that all municipalities establish a more unified and coordinated organisation of social housing policy.

Our qualitative study of 22 local polities, confirm some of the criticisms formulated by the Office of the Auditor General. In many municipalities it is somewhat unclear which administrative body has the main responsibility for the implementation of housing policy. In these local polities there is no centre that leads or coordinates policy. This causes serious problems for the implementation of policy in some cases. For instance, different municipal bodies may quarrel over who is responsible for providing assistance to tenants living in social housing. In some cases it appears that no administrative unit is prepared to foot the bill for these services. This is called “cost-shifting games between agencies” (Øverbye 2009:1) in the international literature on policy coordination. Many of our respondents also state that they see the need to improve the coordination between different policy instruments in their municipality. Furthermore, several respondents report that the communication between the various bodies involved in social housing policy is virtually non-existent. This is consistent with the conclusions in a study by Barlindhaug & Astrup (2008).

When that is said, our study also supplements and qualifies the criticisms presented by the Office of the Auditor General. Firstly, we think it is important to look at the consequences of the fragmented structure both on the level of implementation and the level of strategy. An important conclusion of our study is that the successful cooperation between these two levels is vital for the implementation of a policy that is beneficial to disadvantaged groups. Respondents from many local polities state that the channels of communication between the level of strategy and the level of implementation are weak. In these municipalities the level of implementation is hardly involved in evaluation and planning. This can in turn have the consequence that the level of strategy is not sufficiently informed about the needs of underprivileged groups. Thus, valuable information may not be utilised in the planning of municipal housing policy. In our view, the frequent lack of communication between the level of implementation and the level of strategy is often the most serious problem of the organisational structure in local polities.

Secondly, our study shows that the two-level model can constitute a challenge for the organisation of social housing policy. Since the field of social housing policy rarely is allocated a separate operational unit and often is split between many municipal bodies, there are frequently weaknesses when it comes to the reporting of results and outputs from the field. Since no operational unit is responsible for reporting about the field, it appears that the information that the strategic level receives often is sparse and incomplete. This makes it

difficult to evaluate the quality of the services of social housing policy. In addition, the fragmented nature of the organisation of social housing policy makes it a challenge to collect information about outputs and the perceived needs of disadvantaged groups.

Thirdly, we want to highlight that a fragmented organisational structure does not need to produce bad policies for disadvantaged groups. In fact, in some cases municipalities may have good reasons for not organising all tools of social housing policy within one administrative body. As previously mentioned, many have chosen to let the health services allocate public housing to the elderly, since they have the best overview of the needs and policy instruments directed at this group.

Fourthly, the interviews we conducted show that the problems related to fragmentation are treated seriously in many municipalities. Thus, many local polities have found strategies of policy coordination. In our view, this shows that the grim picture painted by the Office of the Auditor General must be qualified (Langsether et al. 2008). The next section of the paper is devoted to a discussion of the various strategies of coordination employed by the municipalities.

Strategies of coordination

As an analytical starting point, we find it helpful to distinguish between strategies of coordination at the level of implementation, and strategies for coordination between the level of implementation and the level of strategy. These strategies of coordination are meant to produce a more integrated social housing policy to the benefit of disadvantaged groups. On the level of implementation we have managed to find the following examples of such strategies:

The most common strategy is probably what we have called informal coordination. This is a form of cooperation between municipal bodies that is not formalised or anchored in written agreements. Informal coordination occurs regularly when apartments in the public rented sector are allocated. The administrative body responsible for allocating housing will in many cases ask the social services for advice, since they presumably have information about the eligibility of applicants. Furthermore, informal coordination between municipal bodies is necessary in crisis situations, for instance, when a family needs temporary shelter. Even though informal coordination is necessary in many cases, the lack of formalised strategies of coordination must be considered a weakness of any municipal social housing policy. Municipalities who rely too much on informal coordination will surely run into problems in

the long run. This not least due to the fact that policy will rely too much on inherently fragile relationships between the employees in the administrative bodies involved in social housing policy. Therefore, it is not surprising that written agreements with rules and procedures for the cooperation between the bodies involved in housing policy exists in many municipalities. These agreements can be seen as a second strategy of coordination.

The second strategy of coordination is an important aspect of the ongoing NAV-reform. In all municipalities written contracts between the NAV-offices and the bodies responsible for social housing policy are supposed to be crafted. In these contracts the procedures of cooperation are outlined in order to ensure good services for disadvantaged groups. As a result of these agreements people with unfulfilled housing needs are directed by the NAV-offices to the relevant municipal bodies. Despite these agreements, however, there is admittedly a long way to go in many municipalities when it comes to integrating the new NAV-offices as a partner in the implementation of social housing policy. NAV is a large and complex reform and, therefore, social housing policy has not been a priority for the new welfare and work agencies so far (Langsether et al. 2008).

A third strategy of coordination, are represented by special teams with representatives from various bodies of local government. As previously mentioned, many municipalities use such teams for the allocation of all apartments in the public sector. The merits of special teams are connected to the member's vast combined knowledge and expertise about different groups of disadvantaged households. Special teams are also useful because they institutionalise conflicts between various professions about access to social housing for "their clients".

Some municipalities have chosen to locate all or most instruments of social housing policy within one municipal body. This organisational choice is a fourth strategy of coordination. Some local polities have for example moved all the instruments of housing economics – start-up loans, housing allowances and housing grants – to the newly established NAV-offices. Thus, the NAV-reform might not only increase fragmentation, but also contribute to a unification of policy in some cases. There are several reasons for moving all the instruments of housing economics to one administrative body, in line with the recommendations of the State's Housing Bank. Firstly, some argue that it is necessary to concentrate and enhance the expertise about the instruments in the municipalities. Secondly, others claim that underprivileged groups find it easier to locate relevant instruments when they can be found by entering the same door. Finally, it can be argued that concentration enables professionals to combine the instruments of housing economics in packages to suit the

particular needs of individuals. One person might for instance be handed a start-up loan and a housing grant in order to purchase a dwelling of a decent standard.

Other municipalities, such as Tromsø, Lørenskog and Drammen, have moved most tools of policy to one administrative unit. According to our respondents in these municipalities, this organisational model ensures that the effectiveness and flexibility of policy instruments are optimised to the benefit of underprivileged groups. Thus, one respondent states that the centralised model of organisation makes sure that eligible tenants in the public sector are offered housing allowances. If the municipality had chosen a more fragmented organisation of policy instruments this would not be guaranteed, according to the respondent. In addition, many informants state that a centralised organisation makes sure that individuals that find themselves queuing up for a service that they are not eligible for, are redirected to the right waiting line. Individuals that apply for start-up loans, for instance, are sometimes offered an apartment in the public sector, according to our informants. Some respondents also argue that a centralised organisation of the instruments increases the political legitimacy of social housing policy. According to these informants, a unified organisation makes social housing policy more visible and more likely to win the competition over limited budgetary resources. Finally, some respondents argue that a centralised organisation ensures that all relevant housing policy knowledge and competence is utilised to the benefit of disadvantaged groups.

When it comes to the strategies of coordination used to better the relationship between the level of implementation and the level of strategy, we begin by pointing to the seemingly effective, but rather rare instances of municipal housing offices. These offices both administer most relevant social housing policy and are in charge of planning, evaluation and strategy. In municipalities like Tromsø and Ski, where such offices exist, one can say that the distance between the level of strategy and level of implementation are minimised. This organisational model thus provides every opportunity for the integration of valuable information about the needs of disadvantaged groups in the planning, evaluation and strategy of social housing policy. Information about the needs of low-income households and other groups are for instance utilised in the plans for the purchasing or construction of social housing. Thus, by way of conclusion one can say that municipal housing offices can solve the problems related to the two-level model, reporting and evaluation.

Another strategy of coordination used to improve the communication between the level of strategy and the level of implementation are housing committees. These committees function as networks with participation from municipal professional from both levels of social

housing policy. They serve as channels of communication and information exchange between the two levels.

Other strategies of coordination between the two levels include formal participation from municipal bodies on the level of implementation in the planning and evaluation of policy. Our qualitative study indicates that formalisation can be necessary to achieve good processes of planning and evaluation. In some local polities, where the municipal bodies responsible for executing policy are largely absent from meeting where policies are evaluated, it becomes difficult to direct policy in line with pre-decided goals and integrate valuable information into the process of planning. Therefore, the formalisation of participation can be an important step towards more rational processes of planning and evaluation (Langsether et al. 2008).

Conclusions & Policy recommendations

In this paper we have analysed the diverse and fragmented field of Norwegian municipal social housing policy. We have highlighted several problems connected to the fragmented organisational structure of social housing policy in most local polities. However, we would argue that the strategies of coordination found in our qualitative study, give reasons to qualify the grim picture painted by the Office of the Auditor General of Norway (2008; See also, Barlindhaug & Astrup 2008). In this paper we have also found it necessary to supplement the previous studies by directing attention to the vital relationship between the level of strategy and the level of implementation. As previously indicated, we think the frequent lack of communication and coordination between these two levels is the biggest failing of contemporary social housing policy.

When it comes to policy recommendations, we see no reason why we should not advice municipalities to centralise the organisation of social housing policy. However, there exists no blueprint for this centralisation. The allocation of most relevant policy instruments and the responsibilities of planning and evaluation within one municipal body is, of course, one possible model of centralisation. On the other hand, some municipalities have chosen to establish a centre that is responsible for the coordination of policy instruments, planning and evaluation. Thus, these centres do not execute policies, but are still a viable alternative model of centralisation and coordination. Housing committees, like the ones mentioned above, and housing consultants are also possible options for municipalities who strive towards more coordinated policies. Housing consultants, like the ones employed by the municipal

authorities in Grimstad and Moss, are responsible for coordinating policy instruments between different municipal bodies, and are also heavily involved in evaluation and planning.

Furthermore, in light of the various strategies of coordination we uncovered in our qualitative study, we emphasise that there are many possible organisational changes that can contribute towards a good social housing policy. In our view, however, a centralised form of organisation like the ones outlined above, have several advantages from the perspective of underprivileged groups. Firstly, a centralised model of organisation unifies and strengthens the knowledge and competence of social housing policy in the municipalities. Secondly, by all accounts a centralised model contributes to a more effective and flexible use of policy instruments. Thirdly, and maybe most importantly, a centralised model of organisation makes it easier to integrate the level of implementation in the vital processes of planning and evaluation. Moreover, in municipalities who are organised in accordance with the two-level model it can help solve the challenges related to the reporting of outputs and the evaluation of social housing policy.

Appendix 1

Number of municipal bodies involved in social housing policy in Norwegian municipalities. For each task of social housing policy we have registered all cases a body is involved in implementation (total involvement), and all cases where a body is solely responsible for a task (solving alone). Source: Rambøll Management 2008. Answers from 292 municipalities.

Administrative body :	Acquisition of municipal housing		Housing Allocation		Allocation of start-up loans		Allocation of housing allowance		Allocation of housing services	
	Total involv	Solving alone	Total involv	Solving alone	Total involv	Solving alone	Total involv	Solving alone	Total involv	Solving alone
Bodies at strategic level	25	12	11	7	37	23	5	4		
Housing offices	4		7	2	16	13	17	11		
Allotment teams (cross departmental comp.)	32	12	127	57	40	24	18	5	75	25
Technical and Real estate departments	197	136	86	25	58	38	47	26	35	8
Social service offices	20	4	72	15	95	60	121	85	132	45
NAV: Work and Welfare organisation	10	1	29	4	33	23	41	28	49	10
Municipal Service and Information offices	3		24	11	55	37	96	69		
Companies for housing stock management	20	15	12	4	2		0			
Municipal foundations/ Housing cooperatives (BBL)	28	11	14	2			0			
Health, Care and Welfare offices	0		31	3			0			
Others	13	13	12	12	17	17	14	14		
Do not know	16	16	6	6			0		66	66
Total number of bodies	368	220	431	148	353	235	359	242	357	154

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