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# Building back better: A stronger social Europe What role for cities?

Hosted by MEPs



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REPORT



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# Building back better – A stronger social Europe: What role for cities?

Report from the digital high-level conference on 30 September 2020

*135 participants from 47 cities joined this online event alongside Members of the European Parliament, European Commission and EU civil society organisations. The recording of the event is available at <https://youtu.be/r47j4t6y6FA>*

## Official welcome

**Anna Lisa Boni, Secretary General of Eurocities**, welcomed all participants to the online event, which she referred to as a ‘milestone event’ for Eurocities to take stock of the inspiring work done by cities on inclusion and equality policies, working towards a fair and inclusive recovery and paving the way to a stronger social Europe. Anna Lisa referred to three key announcements from Eurocities: the new Eurocities statement for a stronger social Europe, the 22 new city pledges making for a total of 60 pledges to the European Pillar of Social Rights, and a new website entirely dedicated to the Eurocities campaign ‘Inclusive Cities for All’ with the support from the European Commission through the EaSI grant.

## Opening remarks

**Estrella Dura Ferrandis, Member of the European Parliament**, opened the event by stressing that “housing is a fundamental right and must be treated as such” because housing is essential to live safely and in dignity, for professional development as well as getting involved in the public life. Unfortunately, unlike health and educational rights that are well recognised rights and are integral part of public policy system, housing has been treated for too long as a tool for speculation, for private investments and tourist resource. Cities have been suffering for many years from gentrification and touristification because the online platforms for short-term holiday rentals have been inflating the housing prices in cities. According to Estrella, more public investment in social housing is needed and the private sector should be involved as well as the public sector and civil society in horizontal cooperation on this. Guaranteeing the right to housing is linked to democratically managed environment in the city. According to the MEP, building back better means looking at the different models for affordable housing and adopting the best practices. She gave the example of the local observatories in Spain that work well with the focus to build a public stock of rental housing at affordable prices in Spain and could be a model to transfer to other countries. She also informed that the Council of Ministers in Spain adopted new economic measures for vulnerable people at risk of eviction.

“Housing policy is part of the social construction of Europe”, according to MEP Dura Ferrandis. She added “there is an urgent need to change the approach to housing by treating it as a fundamental right and ensuring at least 30% of new housing is affordable for the lower-income groups and another 30% for middle-income group”, as proposed in the European Parliament’s report on affordable housing. More inclusive cities with the right to housing is a good starting point. Cities are leaders to build back a stronger social Europe by working together for a new strategic framework to reduce the housing burden by 2030.

## Launch of Eurocities statement on reinforcing social Europe with cities

The chair of the Eurocities Social Affairs Forum, Sedat Arif, deputy mayor of Malmo, presented the key messages from the Eurocities statement on ‘A stronger social Europe powered by inclusive cities’, outlining the 15 recommendations from cities on how to improve social policies, governance and social investment with a stronger urban dimension. A special focus of the recommendations is on ensuring a fair and inclusive recovery by boosting support for social investments at local level.

The policy statement is available [here](#) and the key messages outlined in the speech can be found [here](#).

## Announcement of new city pledges to the European Pillar of Social Rights

25 city mayors and deputy mayors presented their commitments to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights by putting principles into action through dedicated social investments for reinforcing childcare and support to children, improving affordable and social housing and reducing homelessness, providing active support to employment, skills training, and above all ensuring equal opportunities and fighting poverty. These so-called ‘city pledges’ are part of the Eurocities campaign to build ‘Inclusive Cities for All’ that has so far achieved 60 city pledges, representing 51 million euros, and pooling together social investments worth over 14.2 billion EUR. All city pledges are available at [www.inclusivocities4all.eu](http://www.inclusivocities4all.eu) An overview with summaries of the pledges is available [here](#) and an infographic [here](#).

### Cluster 1: Cities committing to strengthening childcare services and support to children

**17 cities**, nearly a third of all cities with pledges, committed together **over €6 billion** to reinforce childcare services and support to children, showing that a stronger social Europe should start with children.

**Rudy Coddens, Deputy Mayor of Ghent**, presented his city’s pledge to principle 11 of the European Pillar of Social Rights (ESPR) on childcare and support to children, emphasising Ghent’s commitment to invest €570 million to fight child poverty as a top priority across the city services. [Read Ghent’s pledge here](#).

**Helen Godwin, Bristol’s Councillor for Women, Children and Young People**, announced that Bristol is also committed to reinforce childcare and support to children by developing a strategy for a city of belonging where all children can have a good start in life. [Read Bristol’s pledge here](#).

**Constantinos Yiorkadjis, the Mayor of Nicosia**, emphasised his city’s commitment to ensure access for children not only to formal childcare and education, but also to non-formal and leisure/sport activities. [Read Nicosia’s pledge here](#).

From **Bilbao, Itxaso Erroteta, the Councillor for Youth and Sport**, announced that her city has put in place a holistic city plan for children and young people with a budget of €78 million. [Read Bilbao’s pledge here](#).

**Régis Laurand, Deputy Mayor of Pau**, explained Pau’s approach of investing in children’s creativity and access to culture as a way to fight social exclusion and poverty. [Read Pau’s pledge here](#).

**Istanbul’s pledge** to ESPR principle 11 on childcare and support to children impressed the audience given the ambitious goal to build 150 new childcare centres, one per city district, and help lift from poverty over 1 million children. [Read Istanbul’s pledge here](#).

## Cluster 2: Cities committing to enhancing healthcare and social infrastructure

Cities are leading the way not only in social services investment but also in social infrastructure investment, showing that a stronger social Europe depends on stronger social investment at local level. **17 cities** committed to invest **over €4 billion** in more affordable and social housing, and 4 cities explicitly increased their healthcare budget.

**Thomas Fabian, Deputy Mayor of Leipzig**, presented his city's commitment to EPSR principle 16 on healthcare, emphasising the key role of cities in integrating social and mental health services and highlighting that Leipzig increased its budget for mental health services by 30% compared to 2015. [Read Leipzig's pledge here.](#)

**Anne Voituriez, Vice-president of Lille metropole**, announced her city's pledge to EPSR principle 19 on housing and assistance for homeless, committing to develop a Local Housing Plan for 2021-2026 with an investment of €65 million each year in affordable and social housing. [Read Lille's pledge here.](#)

From **Athens, Grigoris Leon, City Councillor and President of Athens Reception and Solidarity Centre**, presented his city's actions to assist the homeless people during the pandemic and beyond by creating, among others, a multipurpose homeless centre. [Read Athens' pledge here.](#)

**Sara Fernández, the Vice-Mayor of Zaragoza**, highlighted the municipal strategy in development to link social inclusion measures with slum eradication and fighting homelessness. [Read Zaragoza's pledge here.](#)

## Cluster 3: Cities committing to active support to employment and skills training

Cities are working hard to help people who lost their jobs due to COVID-19 crisis to get upskilled or reskilled and re-enter the labour market. **10 cities** pledged to provide active support to employment and **7 others** to invest in education and skills training.

**Katarina Niewiedzial, Commissioner of Berlin Senate for Integration and Migration**, presented her city's pledge to EPSR principle 4 on active support to employment, stressing the investment of €167 million to support unemployed people through the Solidary Basic Income Scheme. [Read Berlin's pledge here.](#)

**Emil Boc, the Mayor of Cluj-Napoca**, announced the city's pledge to EPSR principle 1 on education, training and lifelong learning, by committing to create C-Edu-Cluj Education cluster to support the local ecosystem to innovate in education and ensure inclusive education for all, including the disadvantaged. [Read Cluj-Napoca's pledge here.](#)

**Ritva Viljanen, the Mayor of Vantaa**, announced her city's commitment to invest in upskilling its labour force for matching with the changes on the local labour market and the new jobs in local businesses. [Read Vantaa's pledge here.](#)

From **Rennes, Councillor Anabel Marie**, presented the commitment to develop 'Rennes Insertion Pact' for the period 2017-2021 to help 11,000 citizens each year to develop skills and find a good job. [Read Rennes' pledge here.](#)

## Cluster 4: Cities committing to equal opportunities and protecting from poverty

None of the policies above would make any real difference unless they are inclusive of all people and ensuring equal opportunities for all to access and benefit from them.

**Rutger Groot Wassink, Deputy Mayor of Amsterdam**, presented the joint pledge with 5 other cities (Ghent, Gijon, Helsinki, Frankfurt and Utrecht) on EPSR principle 3 on equal opportunities. [Read the joint pledge here.](#)

**Alexandra Sußmann, Deputy Mayor of Stuttgart**, announced her city's commitment to ensure equal opportunities for all people in Stuttgart, including refugees by welcoming and supporting them to integrate in all areas of life right from their arrival to the city. [Read Stuttgart's pledge here.](#)

**Ljubljana's pledge** to EPSR principle 2 gender equality, 3 equal opportunities and 9 on work-life balance, focuses on mainstreaming gender equality in all city policies and training municipal staff on non-discrimination, among other wide-ranging actions. [Read Ljubljana's pledge here.](#)

**Begoña Villacis, Vice-Mayor of Madrid**, presented her city's pledge to EPSR principle 2 on gender equality, and informed about putting in place a network of 17 gender equality spaces and new crisis centre for victims of domestic violence. [Read Madrid's pledge here.](#)

From **Glasgow, Deputy Leader David McDonald** presented his city's pledge to EPSR principle 14 on minimum income, mentioning that Glasgow is a Fair Work City, focused on reducing poverty and increasing the living wage, which the city managed to extend to over 400 employers with more than 89,000 staff, by introducing this specific social clause in public procurement. [Read Glasgow's pledge here.](#)

**Thomas Meeuws, Deputy Mayor of Antwerp**, presented his city's pledge to EPSR principle 20 on access to essential services with a focus on reducing energy poverty from an integrated approach linking social and energy services and early detection of people at risk. [Read Antwerp's pledge here.](#)

## Launch of new website

All city pledges can be found on the new Eurocities website dedicated to this campaign: [www.inclusivecities4all.eu](http://www.inclusivecities4all.eu) This website was designed with the wider public in mind where everyone interested to know about cities' role in social Europe can:

- learn about the commitment (pledge) of each city to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights
- dig into evidence and good practices from cities
- explore the results of our mutual learning programme for cities
- find out about past and future events (webinars, study visits, peer reviews) to take part in

## Key messages from the high-level panel debate

The panel debate, moderated by Ivo Banek, Communications Director at Eurocities, focused on **How to tackle rising urban poverty and inequalities? The role of EU policy and funding to support social investment in public social services.**

## The momentum for bold EU action in new social policy areas

All participants agreed that the European Pillar of Social Rights should be strengthened with new, concrete policy initiatives at EU level to address the current pressing social challenges.

Providing support to the new groups of people facing vulnerability due to the pandemic crisis – the so-called ‘new urban poor’ – is a crucial task for many cities now. In Berlin, new urban poor are many EU citizens who move to the city and face difficulties entering the local labour market and finding decent housing. In fact, homelessness affects more EU mobile-citizens than refugees in Berlin. To help them, Berlin has put in place multilingual info points to share information about social rights, proactively fighting discrimination, through a strong dialogue across labour, integration and social welfare departments in the city and with regional government. Despite that, more needs to be done through an EU framework, according to **Katharina Niewiedzial, Commissioner of the Senate for Integration and Migration, Berlin**. This was echoed by **MEP Brando Benifei** who called for a stronger anti-poverty EU strategy to connect with cities.

In Rotterdam, the effects of the pandemic are seen through increasing debt for vulnerable families. To help them, the city has put in place services to identify the debts early on, provide free counselling and practical support and raise awareness through public campaigns about the taboo around debts. In particular, “tackling child poverty and breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty should be at the core of reinforcing social Europe”, according to **Michiel Grauss, Rotterdam’s Deputy Mayor for poverty reduction**, who announced that his city is preparing a pledge dedicated to fighting child poverty. He called for the European Commission to prioritise investment in children through integrated strategies covering debt reduction, reduction of stress and quality and affordable public services, supported by at least 5% of the allocated funds from the European Social Fund+.

“People living in deprived urban areas are amongst the most heavily affected by this crisis as regional disparities are deepening”, said **Anne Karjaainen, Chair of the Social Policy and Employment Committee (SEDEC) of the Committee of the Regions**, who called for strengthening the European Pillar of Social Rights and giving it more territorial focus.

Youth unemployment increased to 17% in the EU, 5 points higher than before the pandemic, as highlighted by **MEP Brando Benifei**. As access to social security and welfare schemes is inhibited for young people who haven’t ever had a job, the European Parliament proposed in the context of the Youth Guarantee a financial instrument for income support for youth in difficult situations.

“As part of the binding steps needed at European level, besides tackling the housing affordability crisis, ensuring decent labour conditions and a minimum income for all people is key. A debate at EU level on minimum wages and minimum income is needed”, stressed **MEP Agnes Jongerius**.

Confirming that concrete proposals are welcome for the action plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights, **Katarina Ivanković-Knežević, Director of Social Affairs of DG EMPL** announced that the European Commission is already preparing an EU Child Guarantee initiative for early 2021, a new EU Disability Strategy, a minimum wage framework, an initiative on housing exclusion and homelessness as well as planning a new initiative on minimum income.

## EU funding to support social investments

Cities like Berlin use EU funding for many local inclusion measures and projects, but the problem is the lack of flexibility of the EU funds that cannot be easily redirected to address the urgent needs arising from the pandemic. **Katharina Niewiedzial** called for more flexibility and transparency of EU funding and direct communication between cities and the European Commission, given that the communication through national level can be lengthy, overly administrative and can often overlook the direct needs at local level.

Answering Berlin's call for more flexibility in how EU funds are used, **MEP Brando Benifei** explained how the European Parliament is pushing for the Next Generation EU recovery funds to enable re-targeting and re-prioritising programmes to address current social challenges in cities, such as having clear targets for the national recovery plans to tackle urban poverty and youth unemployment. He stressed the importance of multi-level governance to include cities in the programming of the recovery funds.

From the side of the European Commission, **Katarina Ivanković-Knežević** called on cities to work with the national governments to push the social and urban dimension into the national recovery plans that will benefit from EU recovery funds. She indicated that so far the national recovery plans mostly focus on green, digital and transport reforms, but there is a lot of potential to use 25% of the budget of the Recovery and Resilience Facility for investments in social & healthcare services and social policy reforms.

## Governance and the role of cities

"Local authorities are much more aligned with the needs of local citizens", according to **MEP Agnes Jongerius** who also shared that "EU stakeholders are noticing the efforts from cities and perceive it as a progress from the Pact of Amsterdam to mainstreaming the role of cities in EU policies like the European Pillar of Social Rights".

**MEP Estrella Dura Ferrandis** noted that "change is coming bottom-up from cities that can inspire and move policies at national and EU level", referring to cities' inclusive policies to make housing more affordable.

"The local and regional level must be at centre of the action plan on implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights", according to **Anne Karjaainen from the Committee of the Regions**, who also added that "successful recovery must include cities and have strong social dimension".

In his conclusions, **Maarten van Ooijen, Deputy Mayor of Utrecht** called for a new pact between city and EU leaders to work together on strengthening social Europe, highlighting that "cities should be more strongly involved, with a formal seat at the table."

From the European Commission, **Katarina Ivanković-Knežević** invited cities to have their say by sending contributions to the [EU public consultation on social Europe](http://ec.europa.eu/social/easi) until 30 November.



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