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## The HELPS project pilot activity: An info point for housing solutions for seniors (Ljubljana, Slovenia)

### The HELPS project in brief

HELPS (Housing and home care for the elderly and vulnerable people and local partnership strategies in Central European cities) is a project carried out by twelve joint project partners from eight central European countries between October 2011 and December 2014 and implemented through the EU Territorial Cooperation Central Europe Programme co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund.

The general objectives of the HELPS project are to promote development strategies and practices to improve the quality of life of vulnerable groups with a strategic focus on the elderly and people with disabilities in urban areas in central Europe. Its specific objectives are to develop and consolidate innovative housing and care solutions by supporting models of integrated local governance-orientated policies, products and services.

Within the HELPS project, health, social innovation and housing issues are addressed by combining research studies with practical pilot activity. The research activities comprised a transnational review and evaluation of innovative practices in housing and care solutions for the elderly and vulnerable people in central European cities, developing recommendations for national policies and transnational programmes, and implementing individual pilot activities. A unified methodology for de-

scribing and assessing current practices allowed comparability and made the policy implications reliable. The pilot activities were structured according to a common methodology and were adjusted to the main findings from the project's research activities.

The HELPS pilot activities contributed to strengthening independent and active living by the elderly and disabled by focusing on community-based development, creating local governance platforms and paving the way for local action plans. Altogether, twelve partners took part in the project, tested twelve pilot activities and collected primary experience. The outputs of the HELPS projects are available online at <http://www.helps-project.eu>.

### Pilot activity in Slovenia: An info point for housing solutions for seniors

The Slovenian HELPS partner that developed and implemented the pilot activity was the Slovenian Federation of Pensioners' Organisations (ZDUS). The ZDUS is an umbrella NGO that brings together 503 local organisations and pensioners' clubs, with a total of 233,000 members. Given this large potential, ZDUS has an excellent opportunity to involve members of the organisation as potential users and to disseminate information on the services offered by the info point.

### Background for selecting the pilot activity

Like most of the developed world, Slovenia is ageing rapidly. Although the proportion of the population over sixty-five in 2011 was still below the EU-27 average, it is projected that it will be above the EU average in the future (e.g., in 2050 32.6% vs. 30.0%). The cause of the faster ageing rate is a low birth rate that is not outweighed by immigration. The population's median age (41.7) already exceeded the EU-27 average of 41.3 in 2011 (VID, 2012). This steady growth in the population of older people in Slovenia (Černič et al., 2009) has brought to the fore issues of care for the elderly, including housing issues. There are two facts that require a strong policy orientation on housing for the elderly: with Slovenia being a nation of homeowners (Sendi, 2009; Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, SORS, 2014) the homeownership rate among the elderly is one of the highest in the EU, whereas other forms of housing between having one's own home and living in an institution are relatively rare (Mandič & Filipovič Hrast, 2011). Furthermore, as revealed by a recent survey conducted with the support of local pensioners' associations among nearly 6,000 elderly individuals, owner-occupied status (84%) prevails among the elderly (Cibic et al., 2006). Second, more than a quarter of those over sixty-five lived alone in 2002 (Vertot, 2011) and the proportion of these single households is growing. Living

alone means higher economic vulnerability. Several studies (Cibic, 2006; Černič, 2009; Sendi et al., 2009) report difficulties faced by the elderly that live in their own dwellings, such as maintenance and other housing costs. The situation is even less favourable in the city of Ljubljana, where the ageing index is higher than the national one (113.5 vs. 96.3; SORS, 2002) and where some city districts' concentration of the elderly and/or single elderly households greatly exceeds the average (Černič et al., 2009). These facts necessitated a pilot activity orientated towards establishing and promoting new forms of housing solutions for the elderly in Ljubljana.

The decision to develop this particular pilot activity also builds on the advantage of the rather strong role of the civil sector. According to a 2006 survey (Gril, 2006), NGOs play an important role in Slovenia, especially in the central part of the country. The state is the prevalent owner and financer, and is a dominant actor in providing social services. However, the government increasingly recognises that civil society organisations play an important role in providing services to the elderly and to persons with disabilities. This is reflected in the Slovenian pilot activity: 33% of the population in Slovenia are members of at least one NGO, which indicates the importance of civil society organisations.

#### Description of pilot activity

At its headquarters in Ljubljana, the ZDUS established an info point for the elderly with the specific objective of providing up-to-date information and advice to the elderly about various housing and care options, such as availability of places in sheltered houses and retirement homes, homecare assistance, cohousing, advice by experts to adapt houses in an age-appropriate manner, legal support on estate/housing options, reverse mortgages, opportunities

to move from current housing units to age-appropriate ones and so on. The pilot activity included promotion of more flexible thinking about housing options by means of awareness-raising media campaign, publications, lectures, roundtables and other promotional events.

Two specific goals were followed. The first goal is to assist seniors and their families in finding the best solution for where and how to live in the third age, considering their personal needs and preferences. The second goal of the info point is to develop the idea of alternative housing options for seniors in shared households (i.e., cohousing) and to carry out a study on the interest in Slovenia in such a housing option, and also about financial aspects (a feasibility study) and legal requirements for establishing these kinds of senior-friendly housing units.

Within the specific objectives of the pilot activity, the Slovenian partner carried out activities connected to the info point and its direct users. This included giving out information and counselling. During the first year of operation, help and advice was given to 240 users with various problems. The major topics included senior cohousing (various forms; 52%), sheltered housing (15%), availability of retirement homes (10%), homecare assistance (8%), refurbishment and adaptations of dwellings (6%) and legal advice on estate/housing issues (6%).

#### Target groups

Even though the primary beneficiaries of the pilot activity are the elderly themselves, their families were also involved because they are often the ones that offer support to the elderly and are involved in selecting adequate housing solutions and/or adapting the living environment of the elderly. The second group of beneficiaries is the general public because the pilot activity also aims

to raise awareness of the possibilities for spending one's old age and some alternative forms of housing.

#### Description of the implementation process

The implementation process was carried out in accordance with the plan. It included counselling as a tool to provide advice and information for users (beneficiaries) and family members at one point at the front info desk during opening hours, by scheduling meetings or through telephone calls. The process of solving users' problems or addressing their specific housing problems followed the logic of case management, highlighting the design of well-thought-out and comprehensive help or care plans designed in cooperation with users. Such a plan includes:

- Users' problems, needs and desires, as determined from the findings of the user assessment;
- Strategies, such as treatments and interventions, to be determined to address users' problems and needs;
- Goals to be achieved and the timeframe(s) for achieving them, the resources available and the client's desires/motivation that may impact the plan.

During the implementation phase, the ZDUS team recognised two major topics considered particularly important and that therefore needed to be developed further: senior cohousing and adaptations of homes (accessibility and safety) in order to enable older people to stay at home safely and independently.

The ZDUS responded to these needs with two publications on these topics: *Together It's Easier to Be Alone (Da je skupaj lažje biti sam;* Boljka & Ogrin, 2013) and *Adapting the Living Environment and Use of Assistive Devices for the Elderly (Prilagoditev opreme in uporaba pripomočkov za starejše;* Slovenian Federation of Pensioners' Organisations,



Figure 1: Counselling at the info point (photo: ZDUS team).



Figure 2: HELPS senior cohousing booklet (photo: ZDUS team).

2013). Special attention was given by the ZDUS to promoting the info point and disseminating information. When designing promotional activities, special attention was given to selecting “user friendly” channels and media for the given age group for disseminating information. Publishing was thus accompanied by public presentations, workshops and other promotional activities.

Altogether ZDUS has published thirty-two articles on this topic, given five interviews and promoted the pilot activity and its activities through several presentations and lectures, including interviews and articles in the local and national media. The media also took part in the promotion with six radio programmes, three TV programmes and five commercials.

### Innovative component of the results

This model contributes to optimising cooperation between the government and civil sector in order to improve the social sphere. The info point improved the usage of other social services pro-

vided by the state and by the NGO sector because it shared information about housing and care services. Therefore the pilot activity maximised the efficiency of housing services as well as its own functioning. By promoting cooperation between professionals, clients could access personalised information on issues affecting housing for the elderly. Through the pilot activities, experts in the field worked effectively and cooperated while getting closer to clients. Considering the success of the pilot activity, the partner wishes to extend it to other cities in the future.

Although the period of pilot activity is over, the info point was still open for clients in 2014 because the Slovenian partner managed to obtain local funds to cover basic costs; they are searching for additional funds to continue the activities in the future (see Internet 1).

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