
Summary

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Local authorities' administration of Government housing allowance - from the case officers' point of view

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This report concerns governmental housing allowance, as seen from the angle of case officers in local administrations. In question is content and organisation of the local work with the allowance, interaction between this allowance and other instruments of housing policy, and case officers' views on current regulations and the practice of the Norwegian State Housing Bank.

The report is based on interviews with case officers in 18 Norwegian local administrations, including two wards of Oslo. The interviews have covered practices concerning governmental housing allowances in the various administrations, as well as interaction between these allowances and instruments of housing policy available to the administrations. Such instruments can be public housing, loans, grants or housing allowances given by the local administrations on certain terms. Loans and grants may be financed by the Norwegian State Housing Bank. We have also asked the case officers for their views on the housing allowances system as such, and for their possible suggestions for improvement.

The study is exploratory. Rather than trying to compile a representative sample of local administrations, we have seen to that size, region and the frequency of recipients of housing allowances and social security respectively, vary throughout the sample.

Findings:

Work organisation: We have found that reception and control of applications for housing allowance is located either in social service

units, in units responsible for public real estate, or in units responsible for general contact with the public. The latter is advantageous insofar as this location may contribute positively in the process of controlling and correcting applications.

Resources: In most administrations the total work with government housing allowances amounts to less than one man-year labour. This generally relates to a fairly small number of applications. The average is approximately one man-year labour per 1.000 applications.

Public housing: All the administrations in the study use public housing to some extent. Rents in public housing seem to an increasing extent to be based on building and maintenance cost or market price. Some administrations however are set on using somewhat subsidised prices.

Local housing allowance systems: Approximately 10 % of the local administrations have local housing allowance systems. There are two main forms: Those that offer an extended coverage to people already awarded government housing allowance, and those that offer allowance to certain tenants in certain public or private residences according to specific regulations. Generally local and government allowances are coordinated by the local administrations, and often government allowance is paid to the administration and in turn deducted from the tenants' rent together with the local allowance.

Loans and grants: "Startlån" is a loan offered by the Norwegian State Housing Bank to local administrations for re-lending to citizens who have difficulty financing a modest home in the open market. To some extent it can be combined with housing allowance, most often for disabled or pensioners. For families with children, the maximum income limits of the housing allowance are such that recipients in most cases cannot be expected to be able to pay mortgages. In other cases housing allowance may be awarded due to temporary benefits, implying that their economic standing is likely to change within a few years.

Relation between case officers and the Norwegian State Housing Bank: Local administrations are generally content with support and cooperation from the Norwegian State Housing Bank, but some criticism pertains to how changes in the housing allowance system are set into practice.

Electronic applications: Electronic applications via Internet, which have been available through 2006, are rarely used and present no

reduction in the amount of local work with applications. This is in part because even electronic applications require documentation to be handed in or sent physically to the local administration.

Suggestions for improvement: Case officers generally see the need to simplify the housing allowance system, particularly to the effect that conditions concerning the residence with respect to size, technical status, loans etc., should not vary between different groups of applicants. A possible change towards monthly rather than four-monthly acceptance of new applications is welcomed. Some are however concerned that this may require increased capacity.

By and large case officers feel that the maximum income limits ought to be higher and that the amount awarded to each applicant could well be larger.