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# Summary

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## **Residential quality and municipal planning**

The record of the municipal planning system in promoting universal design

NIBR Report 2009:8

### **Background**

This project stems from divergent observations concerning government policy on qualities in housing and construction on the one hand, and closely corresponding municipal tasks and responsibilities on the other. The past decade saw policy change in the municipalities' housing policy from a focus on supplying general purpose housing, to one on social housing and welfare. In a similar fashion, residential quality is now a subcategory of municipal housing policy in connection with policy initiatives and issues related to social housing.

### **Research questions**

This project focuses at municipalities which have prepared social housing action plans. We asked:

- Do the social housing action plans routinely include housing quality standards?
- Has social housing planning created a space for discussions about residential quality?

Social housing planning got under way in 2003, and many of the plans studied by us date back to this early period. Municipalities have since worked on rotating the social services and land use sections of the master plan. What we wanted to learn was whether

quality standards are ultimately incorporated into the master plan. We asked:

- What happens in municipalities whose social housing policy includes statements on residential quality – does it have an impact on planning within other services etc.? Are the quality statements reproduced in land use plans?

We were not sure of finding zoning provisions concerning “universal design” in the municipalities, so we looked at some of the municipalities where we could expect a particular focus on these issues: municipalities resented in the Pilot Municipality Project, BU-13, i.e., the Government’s programme to ease accessibility for people with disabilities (see *Regjeringen handlingsplan for økt tilgjengelighet for personer med nedsatt funksjonsevne. En plan for universell utforming innen viktige samfunnsområder*). Municipalities have worked across a broad front, with inter-municipal brainstorming and learning sessions during which cross sectoral projects were hammered out and formed into sub-projects. Municipal planning under the provisions of the Planning and Building Act met with a great deal of interest at these meetings. Several municipalities took steps to incorporate universal design in the drafting stages of the master plan, and a subproject under BU 31 was created (BU 31-3) to investigate how universal design could be integrated effectively and sensibly. We wanted to study what happened in these municipalities:

- When municipalities have formulations on residential quality standards in their zoning plans, what standards do they have in mind? What is their experience of the zoning plan as a policy instrument to promote residential standards based on universal design? Has it made any difference to development plans or the handling of building permits?
- Do the municipalities use other ways of promoting integration of the desired housing quality standards? If the answer is yes, how do they work?

### **Methodology and data**

The project relies mostly on document studies of plans and policy objectives posted on the websites of the municipalities or contained in material they provided for us. We also obtained information from interviews.

The first task was to look at the social housing plans from municipalities in one particular county to see whether housing quality criteria were included on a routine basis. We then assessed social housing plans from two of the municipalities that we knew had adopted quality criteria to see how they fared as planning progressed.

Secondly, we assessed the three pilot municipalities and studied their planning documents. The output from this assessments was written together, for each municipality, and sent back to them as background material to form the basis for in-depth interviews.

Thirdly, we studied Stavanger City Council's preferred model of integrating the housing qualities of choice. The city council provided information on their use of technical regulations and administrative procedures in quality assurance work, information that was supplemented with interviews.

### **Findings**

We studied eight plans from municipalities in Østfold County but found little mention of housing quality. Most expressed a commitment to purpose-built housing for disabled and disadvantaged people, and to adapting existing housing to these residents' needs. Adaptations tend to address the needs of elderly residents. Municipalities take advantage moreover of the State Housing Bank's housing grants for this purpose. Insofar as the Østfold municipalities are concerned about universal design, it appears to be limited to making municipal housing more acceptable to residents in terms of location, floor space and quality.

#### *Zoning plans and manuals*

We studied two municipalities which had included quality assurance mechanisms in their social housing action plans. One of the municipalities made sure that the housing quality standards were included in the preparatory work for the new master plan. A provision was also included in zoning plans, instructing developers and builders to take universal design as a starting point for the design of developments and the common outdoor areas. Here, however, work seems to come to a halt, possibly because universal design is an unclear concept from which to derive definite criteria, requirements and standards etc. Its vagueness also makes it

difficult for planning authorities to translate universal design into practice.

The problem is similar to that facing the pilot municipalities, i.e. whether it is possible to integrate the universal design principle in plans and other policy instrument: Trondheim City Council worked hard on a manual intended to flesh out the bone of the principle. But there is no compulsion on anyone to abide by either manuals or standards – signing up to them is entirely voluntary. Several municipalities, including Trondheim, have attempted to make their guidelines/ project design tools compulsory by including references in zoning plans. This they were told, however, was illegal. Trondheim City Council is pursuing the matter further, but now in terms of a project design tool.

Stavanger found a “safe” route through conditional sale and an appurtenant quality programme, a strategy most municipalities would struggle to follow. Also for Stavanger City Council this will be an increasingly difficult path, given the shortage of municipal owned land for building.

*New law – new possibilities for implementing quality measures and universal design?*

Norway has a new planning law. Under the new law, zoning provisions can be given for fourteen categories of land use, out of which some are related to housing standards. Some municipalities nurture a hope of being able to subsume housing quality standards under the zoning provisions. But we ask whether this is wise? Should municipalities define quality standards themselves and use municipal policy tools to realize them?

*Standardised construction – a challenge*

We have reflected over this issue in light of developments in the housing manufacturing sector. Houses are not manufactured locally but by leading national and Scandinavia-wide enterprises. To ensure quality and reduce costs, a lot of work has been done on industrializing and standardizing housing construction, and the project design depends on a greater degree of standardization. Conceptual drawing should be preferred when it comes to designing flats, shell constructions, facades, details and technical installations etc. Many standards associated with universal design is

found in the layout plan, including room size and service areas, inter-room connections and passages. Further systemization and modular housing production is desired by the industry, though the municipal need for controlling of residential quality could in effect become a regulatory barrier. In other words – it is a mismatch between the construction sectors' increased standardised building and municipal efforts of imposing quality measures through locally made regulatory means.