

Housing isn't just shelter

It's the foundation on which the rest of life is built*

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This June, social housing developers, researchers, policymakers and advocates participated in the 4th International Social Housing Festival in Dublin, Ireland. A handful of Canadians joined more than 2,200 people from 35 countries covering six continents to learn about innovative approaches in social housing. The inaugural, now bi-annual festival was held in Amsterdam in 2017 with 1300 hundred in attendance. Since then, there has been a growing interest beyond Europe as individuals working in affordable rental housing related sectors seek ways to achieve the right to housing for all.

The conference began with an overview of the history of housing, describing the expansion of social housing in the UK and Europe post-World War II followed by a decline beginning in the 1980s when governments began to favour private sector solutions.

This trajectory has been replicated in other liberal democracies, including Canada. Federal funding for publicly owned housing increased during the 1960s with a shift toward non-profit housing in the 1970s and 1980s. The federal government began the process of devolving responsibility for social housing to provincial and municipal governments in the 1980s and ceased funding new social housing units in 1993. The disinvestment in social housing aligned with a general shift to neoliberalism in the 1980s and the belief that the market should be left to its own devices. It hasn't worked. Access to low-rent housing is virtually non-existent and homelessness is on the rise. In

2017 the federal government introduced the National Housing Strategy (NHS) followed by the National Housing Strategy Act which puts into law the human right to housing. The strategy promised to prioritize housing for the most vulnerable, but it has failed to create the kind of housing most needed. It has mostly served to incentivize private for-profit developers, leading to the development of housing that is not affordable for low-income households. A recent NHS progress report shows that only 10% of funding allocated through the Strategy's four largest programs has gone to the social housing focused Rapid Housing Initiative. Advocates for low-income renter households maintain that there needs to be a shift in priority toward social housing if we are to achieve the baseline goal of 500,000 additional deeply affordable units nationally.

The International Social Housing festival is inspiring to housing advocates because it showcases innovative, non-market approaches supported by governments in other nations. For example:

- 29% of housing in the Netherlands is social housing, mainly provided by non-profit housing providers. Social housing has continued to be an important source of affordable housing, keeping rents low and units out of the speculative market.
- Vienna, Austria is well known for its large supply of social housing. The City is the landlord of approximately 220,000 socially rented apartments, making it the largest home-owning city in Europe. A quarter of the people who live in Vienna are social tenants. Additionally, there are approximately 200,000 co-operative dwellings in Vienna, built with municipal subsidies.
- In Barcelona, Spain the municipality is taking strong action to address housing affordability. The City has implemented an acquisition mechanism to make 15 percent of homes in the city either social or affordable. It includes a legal provision giving right of first refusal to the City to buy certain properties being sold, including social housing, housing owned by banks and investment funds, and multi-family buildings, dilapidated or unoccupied buildings, and empty homes, at market value. The policy has helped curb speculative activity that would increase rents and evict tenants.

These are just a few examples of innovative social housing policies and programmes that Canada can learn from as the new government puts its mark on housing policy. During the 2025 election campaign, the Liberal party rolled out its plan to create Build Canada Homes (BCH), promising to “get the federal government back into the business of home building” by “acting as a developer to build affordable housing at scale, including on public lands.” During the leadership debate, Mark Carney noted that affordable housing extends beyond homeownership and promised to invest in “deeply affordable” housing. The Liberal government describes its housing plan as “Canada’s most ambitious housing plan since the Second World War”. It has this potential but only if the government learns from the limitations of post war interventions that initially excluded social housing, and post 1980s policy that continues to emphasize private sector solutions. An ambitious plan must prioritize housing as a basic human right. It must include a strong regulatory framework to control the financialization of housing and deter landlords from drastic rent increases, and a robust commitment to non-market, including public housing, that is affordable to low- and moderate-income households.

Canadians who participated in the conference have since reflected on what we learned and how Canada compares. We are inspired knowing that a robust supply of social housing is possible. But

we also remain frustrated at how difficult it is to convince Canadian policy makers that social housing needs to be a central component of a housing plan, as described in the 2020 OECD report *Social Housing: A Key Part of Past and Future Housing Policy*.

The housing challenges we are experiencing in Canada are not unique, but Canada is falling behind other countries. It was encouraging to be at an event filled with people committed to housing as a human right and an understanding that this goal will not be achieved through the private market. However, the Canadians who needed most to learn about the progressive housing policies taking shape in other jurisdictions are our elected officials who have the power to shape housing policy to serve the public good.

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* Blakestown & Mountview Youth Initiative, Dublin Ireland, Dublin International Social Housing Festival June 11-13, 2025



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