

What citizens' assemblies add to Europe's housing agenda

Housing evidence and deliberative design, lessons from the EU-CIEMBLY pilots

Executive summary

The EU housing agenda is moving from the agenda-setting to the legislation and implementation phase: the European Commission presented the [Affordable Housing Plan](#) in December 2025 and the [Affordable Housing Act](#) on September 9 2026, that includes a [Commission Recommendation on housing affordability and supply in areas under housing stress](#) and a proposal for a [Regulation establishing a framework for measures in Member States to safeguard housing affordability and availability](#). This proposal now enters the ordinary legislative procedure, at the same time as the [European Housing Alliance](#) is creating a new multi-level forum for policy delivery. The question that stands is, therefore, not only what measures are being adopted, but whose experience informs their design, amendment and implementation.

What this agenda still lacks is structured, deliberated input from the people that the crisis hits hardest. EU-CIEMBLY contributes three forms of evidence to this decision window. First, its 2026 citizens' assemblies in Colchester and Cyprus produced 32 recommendations on affordability, housing stock, tenant protection, quality and accessibility, access to support, and housing governance. Second, the pilots tested an intersectionality-embedded deliberative method designed to bring overlapping forms of disadvantage into the same discussion rather than treating people as single-category stakeholders. Third, they make accountability part of participation: institutions are asked to respond publicly to recommendations and explain what will or will not be taken forward. The proposed Affordable Housing Act makes this input even more necessary. As tabled, it creates new decision points for national, regional and local authorities and surrounds them with transparency and judicial review safeguards; but, nonetheless, it does not require authorities to consult, let alone deliberate with, the residents concerned. The EU-CIEMBLY approach fills in this gap by allowing citizens, particularly the most affected, to contribute to Europe's housing agenda.

The brief identifies five substantive housing priorities and one cross-cutting governance principle. It argues that EU-CIEMBLY should be used as a citizen-deliberated implementation test: do proposed measures work for people facing multiple barriers, are responsibilities and eligibility clear, and have unintended effects been considered? It recommends that the European Parliament and the Council use this evidence when deciding on the proposed Affordable Housing Act and add a resident engagement requirement to its procedural safeguards; that the Commission and Member States apply the same requirement in following up the accompanying Recommendation; that the European Housing Alliance create a standing channel for deliberative citizen input; that the EU-CIEMBLY participation method inform future housing engagement; and that institutions publish formal responses to the assemblies' recommendations.

Statement of the issue: the democratic case for citizen-led housing policy

Citizens' assemblies are often presented simply as a way of hearing from the public. However, their value for EU policy-making is more than that. Recommendations produced through structured deliberation carry a distinctive kind of authority, which can be described along the three dimensions that are used to assess the legitimacy of EU governance: input, output and throughput (Schmidt 2013 and 2020, Coman 2018). In this framework, **input legitimacy** rests on participation by and representation of the people, **output legitimacy** on effectiveness for the people, and **throughput legitimacy** on the quality of the governance processes that connect the two: governance with the people, judged by its efficacy, accountability, transparency, inclusiveness and openness to consultation. The EU has significantly invested in the first two. In the housing field, however, the EU still relies on consultation formats that reach organised interests far more easily than they reach households under housing stress. The two EU-CIEMBLY pilots conducted so far (one local, in Colchester, and one national, in Cyprus) address this gap across all three dimensions at once. EU-CIEMBLY adds a citizen-deliberated implementation lens to the European housing agenda: it combines substantive recommendations from people facing varied housing pressures with a tested method for intersectionality-embedded deliberation and a public feedback loop.

Input legitimacy: whose experience enters the discussion

Standard consultations such as calls for evidence, stakeholder dialogues, or expert groups are open in principle but selective in practice. The Affordable Housing Act itself was prepared through exactly these formats: between 6 March and 3 April 2026 the Commission ran a call for evidence (617 contributions), a targeted questionnaire (303 responses) and four workshops with Member States, regions, cities, stakeholders and experts. These mechanisms usually reward organisations with the time, staff and expertise to respond, and sort people into single categories (tenant, student, person with a disability) that rarely match the way housing disadvantage is actually lived. Both EU-

CIEMBLY pilot assemblies on housing policy were designed to correct this (EU-CIEMBLY 2026). Recruitment went beyond standard sortition in order to include people positioned at the intersection of several marginalised characteristics, whom conventional consultation typically misses. In Colchester, a co-design phase with Citizens Essex and the University of Essex Students' Union shaped the framing and the ground rules of the pilot before the 50 participants met; in Cyprus, in total 60 participants joined the Assembly with input from the Office of the Commissioner for Gender Equality, the Cyprus Red Cross and two universities. The groups that are named in the resulting recommendations (disabled people, single parents, low-income and long-term unemployed households, migrants, students and international students) are precisely those whose circumstances cut across the categories used in standard consultations. The result is a body of recommendations whose authors can genuinely claim to speak for the people that EU housing policy is meant to serve, and not only for those who usually speak on their behalf.

Throughput legitimacy: a transferable deliberative method

Schmidt's central insight is that legitimacy depends not only on who participates and on what results, but on what happens in between. A process can have broad input and defensible output and still lack legitimacy if the way it was run is opaque, exclusionary or biased. Throughput legitimacy is most salient when it fails: practices perceived as biased or incompetent call the whole exercise into question, input and output included. The EU-CIEMBLY pilots were designed with this in mind (Sandri et al. 2026). Ground rules were co-designed rather than imposed. Deliberation ran through iterative small-group rounds across three sessions, online and in person, so that positions could be tested and revised rather than voted on once. Facilitation was attentive to power and positionality (who speaks, who is interrupted, whose experience counts as evidence) and the explicit objective was shared understanding rather than consensus, so that minority positions survived into the final text instead of being averaged out. These features allow the recommendations to be read as the considered judgement of a plural group rather than as the view of its loudest members.

They are also why this policy brief proposes (action 4) that they become minimum standards wherever housing policy is developed with citizen input.

Output legitimacy: policies that are accepted and that work

Output legitimacy is about effectiveness, and here the intersectional lens has a practical pay-off. Housing measures fail most often at the point where a general rule meets a specific everyday life problem: a rent cap that shifts costs into higher upfront deposits, a subsidy whose eligibility criteria and application route defeat the very people it targets, an accessibility requirement assessed only after a home has been let or sold. Both assemblies anticipated these failure modes. Their recommendations link each measure with the conditions under which it would work for the most affected (transparent eligibility, clear enforcement responsibilities, information before commitment, suitability assessed before letting) and both flagged the unintended effects of price regulation rather than ignoring them. Policies shaped in this way are more likely to be accepted by those they target, because those people recognise their own lived experience and circumstances in the design, and such policies are more likely to work in practice, because the design has been stress-tested against those circumstances before adoption.

Closing the loop: accountability as part of the method

Deliberation also creates a feedback loop requirement. The three dimensions only generate legitimacy if they are connected in a loop: citizens deliberate, institutions receive the recommendations, respond to them publicly and report back on what was done and why, and citizens see the effect. Where that loop effectively closes, trust in the policy process grows; where it stays open, participation becomes an expensive form of performative consultation, and the legitimacy gained on input and throughput is lost on output. Accountability, in the form of a public commitment by the targeted authority to respond to and implement the recommendations, is a core condition for a credible deliberative process (OECD 2020). It is also why the first recommendation of EU-CIEMBLY Policy Brief n.º 2 (June 2026) concerned accountability mechanisms and concrete follow-up, and why the

fifth action proposed below asks for a formal, published institutional response to both assemblies. In Cyprus, a Member of the European Parliament and the Commissioner for the Rights of the Citizen have already asked to receive the report formally; in Colchester, the City Council and the University of Essex are the named addressees. A third, transnational pilot is expected to run in November and December 2026.

Background

The European Commission presented the first-ever [European Affordable Housing Plan](#) on 16 December 2025 (COM(2025) 1025 final), together with a revision of State aid rules on Services of General Economic Interest and a European Strategy for Housing Construction. On 10 March 2026, the European Parliament adopted the own-initiative [report on the housing crisis](#) prepared by its Special Committee on the Housing Crisis (HOUS).

Legislation and implementation are now under way on several tracks at the same time. On 9 September 2026 the Commission presented the proposal for an Affordable Housing Act, including a [Regulation](#) establishing a common framework for the measures that national, regional and local authorities take to safeguard housing affordability and availability in “areas under housing stress”, with the scope limited to measures restricting short-term rentals in residential properties and the acquisition or use of residential property for purposes other than a primary residence. The proposal, however, does not harmonise housing policy or oblige any authority to intervene.

The proposed Regulation now goes to the European Parliament and the Council under the ordinary legislative procedure, and the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions are to deliver opinions. It is expected that the text will change in that process, so the coming months are the window in which the design of its safeguards can still be influenced.

Also, on 30 April 2026, after meeting the Mayors for Housing alliance in Brussels, European Council President António Costa announced that EU leaders would return to discuss housing; the informal meeting of Heads of State or Government is scheduled in Dublin for 13 November 2026, and the Irish Presidency will host a meeting of housing

ministers on 25 November 2026. On 12 May 2026, at the meeting of housing ministers in Nicosia, Commissioner for Energy and Housing Dan Jørgensen launched the European Housing Alliance: the open multi-level platform intended to deliver the Plan on the ground.

If this sequence of events is well supplied with governmental, sectoral and expert input, it is far less well supplied with direct input from residents, tenants, students and disabled people who experience housing stress directly, and whose circumstances rarely fit the single categories used in standard consultation. That is the key gap the EU-CIEMBLY pilots addresses and that informs the present policy brief, with the aim to influence the proposed Regulation to push for meaningful residents involvement before designating an area as under housing stress or before restricting how homes there may be used.

Summary of Findings

Colchester (local pilot). Between February and March 2026, 50 Colchester residents (students and local residents from different backgrounds and nationalities) met to discuss housing policy and issues in three sessions: online on 24 February, in person at the University of Essex Colchester campus on 28 February, and online on 10 March 2026. The assembly was preceded by a co-design process with Citizens Essex and the University of Essex Students' Union, which detailed the framing and ground rules. Deliberation was organised around affordability and social housing, student accommodation, income insecurity, social and economic barriers to access, housing support for disabled people and people on Universal Credit, and accessibility. It produced 18 recommendations addressed to Colchester City Council, the University of Essex, and the UK national government.

Cyprus (national pilot). In April and May 2026, Cyprus's first citizens' assembly on housing brought together a total of 60 residents in three sessions: online on 22 April, in person at the University of Cyprus in Nicosia on 25 April and online on 6 May 2026. Invited experts and policy-makers from the Office of the Commissioner for Gender Equality, the Cyprus Red Cross, the

University of Nicosia and the University of Cyprus brought gender, vulnerability, social cohesion and student perspectives into the discussion. Participants prioritised co-habitation, discrimination, housing quality, disability, the institutional framework, and the mismatch between new housing supply and real needs, producing 14 recommendations. Both a Member of the European Parliament and the Commissioner for the Rights of the Citizen asked to receive the report formally and to discuss follow-up.

The 32 recommendations in full

The full text of the 18 Colchester and 14 Cyprus recommendations, as adopted by the participants, is published in the two EU-CIEMBLY reports *Colchester Citizens' Assembly on Housing – Recommendations Report* and *Cyprus Citizens' Assembly on Housing – Recommendations Report*, available at <https://www.eu-ciembly.eu/en/policy-papers>. The section that follows consolidates them into six priorities.

Six convergent priorities for European housing policy

The two sets of recommendations arising from the pilots are presented separately in the reports, since one addresses a non-EU national context and the other an EU Member State. Read together, however, they converge on six priorities that are directly relevant to the European housing agenda. Each priority indicates the source recommendations it consolidates (numbers refer to the numbering used in the two reports).

1 Bring existing homes back into use and diversify housing models

Both assemblies focused on the stock of housing that already exists rather than on new construction alone: mandatory or incentivised activation of vacant, derelict and underused property, public purchase and renovation, and support for collective and intergenerational living models, piloted with specific groups. This aligns directly with the Affordable Housing Plan's attention to using the existing housing stock, and gives it a citizen mandate. It also speaks directly to the proposed Act, which expressly covers measures addressing long-term vacancy (Articles 5(b), 9(4) and 10(1)(g)), and to the accompanying Recommendation on housing supply. EU instruments can support better use of existing stock, while activation, acquisition and renovation decisions are primarily implemented at national, regional or local level. (Cyprus 1, 3, 5; Colchester 15.)

2 Use transparent affordability rules and test for unintended effects

Participants in both pilots asked for prices to be governed by transparent rules rather than left entirely to the market. This entails adopting caps on rents and deposits set locally, rent guidelines, a quality scoring system determining maximum rents, limits on property concentration, and (more cautiously) limits on profit above mortgage costs. Both assemblies coupled these measures with a warning about their potential unintended negative effects, notably higher upfront deposits and reduced supply, that need to be anticipated. Although rent regulation as such falls outside the scope of the proposed Regulation under the Affordable Housing Act (recital 33), that warning about unintended effects applies to the measures that it mentions, such as restrictions on short-term rentals and on non-primary residential use (Article 10(1)(b) (Cyprus 3, 9; Colchester 1, 3, 16, 18.)

3 Make tenant protection secure and enforceable

The shared diagnosis is that rights exist on paper but not in practice. The recommendations ask for longer-duration contracts, clear enforcement responsibilities for anti-discrimination and tenant protection law, accountability mechanisms covering both landlords and tenants, regulation of who may let property, oversight of estate agents, and a policy stance that treats renters as a group to be actively supported. While most enforcement measures sit with national or local authorities; EU-level housing work can nevertheless treat enforceability as a design criterion and support comparison and learning across systems. (Cyprus 4, 8; Colchester 4, 16, 17.)

4 Treat quality, safety and accessibility as enforceable standards

A distinctive design point is timing: accessibility and suitability across different forms of disability should be assessed before letting or sale, not only after a problem emerges. Further, housing quality was raised as a matter of health, dignity and independent living, not only comfort. Both assemblies asked for minimum standards, a legal framework covering dangerous buildings and landlord certification, an oversight body, accessibility requirements in new builds, functioning repair systems, and support for independent living including decentralised homecare. Accessibility here means suitability across different forms of disability, assessed before letting or sale. EU housing initiatives can treat quality and accessibility as implementation conditions while national, regional and local authorities retain responsibility for many standards and enforcement mechanisms. (Cyprus 6, 7, 11; Colchester 2, 9.)

5 Ensure that support and information actually reaches those most affected

Participants repeatedly treated access to information and support as part of policy effectiveness: a benefit or right that cannot be understood, applied for, or enforced is not fully accessible in practice. The largest single cluster of recommendations concerns access: walk-in hubs and platforms combining advice, legal information and emotional support; clear information on contracts and rights before people commit; transparent eligibility criteria for subsidies; and targeted attention to groups repeatedly named in both pilots (disabled people, single parents, low-income and long-term unemployed households, migrants, students and international students). EU-supported housing tools should test whether eligibility, information and application routes are usable by people facing multiple barriers. (Cyprus 12, 13; Colchester 5–13.)

6 Institutionalise citizen voice and accountability in housing governance

Both assemblies asked for participation and accountability to be built into housing governance: engagement with affected groups before measures are adopted, independent monitoring of housing law and policy, and permanent forums where residents and students can raise problems and see how they are addressed. The proposed Regulation currently requires competent authorities to publish their assessments before a measure enters into force (Article 13), but not to engage affected residents in making them; the assemblies' demand fills that gap. EU-CIEMBLY adds a replicable process standard: targeted outreach, accessibility and participation support, facilitation attentive to power and positionality, iterative deliberation, documentation of minority positions and a transparent institutional response. This mirrors the accountability recommendation of Policy Brief no. 2 and is the condition for the other five priorities to be implemented as intended. This fits the European Housing Alliance's stated principles of subsidiarity, multi-level governance, openness and inclusive participation, and offers one tested model for connecting policy with realities on the ground (Cyprus 2, 10, 14; Colchester 14.)

From pilots to EU policy: five actions

1. European Parliament and Council: use the 32 recommendations as citizen-deliberated input when amending the proposed Regulation under the Affordable Housing Act.

Map the recommendations against the proposal as tabled; distinguish what the Act establishes from what remains a national, regional or local competence; and identify where the assemblies expose implementation risks, access barriers or unintended effects. Two possible amendments follow directly from results of the pilots: a requirement that competent authorities engage the residents of an area before designating it as under housing stress and before adopting, extending or reviewing a measure (Articles 6, 10 and 12), and a requirement that the published assessment (Article 13) record how that input was obtained and taken into account. The same evidence should reach the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, whose opinions the proposal foresees, and the Commission, which will prepare implementation guidance for competent authorities and follow up the Recommendation. EU-CIEMBLY's contribution is citizen-deliberated design evidence, and can be used to show the EU institutions what housing measures need to look like to work for people at the intersection of several disadvantages.

2. European Housing Alliance: create a standing channel for deliberative citizen input.

Build a recurring mechanism for assembly outputs and citizen deliberation into the Alliance's multi-level work. Use EU-CIEMBLY's method as one tested model for inclusive participation, and publish how citizen input is considered alongside governmental, expert and stakeholder input. A recurring channel for assembly outputs and for citizens' representation would move it beyond consultation, at no additional legislative cost.

3. Irish Presidency and November meetings: circulate citizen-deliberated evidence as a short policy input.

Prepare a two-page synthesis of the five substantive priorities, the cross-cutting governance principle and the 32 source recommendations for circulation ahead of the informal meeting of Heads of State or Government on 13 November and the informal housing ministers' meeting on 25 November 2026, and for the Council's examination of the proposed Affordable Housing Act, which begins under the same Presidency. Identify the institutional sponsor responsible for tabling or circulating the note once the relevant agendas are confirmed.

4. EU institutions and participating public authorities: use a minimum standard for intersectionality-embedded deliberation.

Specify targeted outreach for future housing participation; accessibility, accommodation and participation support; facilitation attentive to power and positionality; iterative deliberation; documentation of minority positions; and a transparent institutional response. This turns the EU-CIEMBLY method into a checkable and replicable design standard. It should also be the standard adopted in the Commission's implementation measures for competent authorities under the future Regulation and in the follow-up of the Recommendation

5. Close the feedback loop with a public response matrix.

State, for each recommendation, whether it will be taken forward, partly taken forward or not taken forward; explain why; identify the responsible body and next step; and publish the response within a defined public timeframe. Use the resulting follow-up evidence to inform the November 2026 transnational pilot and future EU-CIEMBLY work.

FURTHER READING

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