

# Expanding the Social Rental Housing Stock in Flanders: Money Isn't the Problem

Sien Winters <sup>1</sup> , Emmanuel Dockx <sup>2</sup> , and Katleen Van den Broeck <sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> HIVA, KU Leuven, Belgium

<sup>2</sup> University of Antwerp, Belgium

**Correspondence:** Sien Winters ([sien.winters@kuleuven.be](mailto:sien.winters@kuleuven.be))

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## Abstract

In Flanders, social rental housing serves as the primary policy instrument to address housing affordability issues. However, the current supply of social housing falls significantly short of meeting all needs. Despite broad political consensus and increased government budgets for social housing since 2013, it has become increasingly difficult to allocate the budget to new investment projects. By the end of 2021, only a fraction of the annual credit had been allocated, sparking discussions. This article explores two key questions: How can we explain the delay in the supply of social housing when the need is acknowledged and the funds are available? How can this problem be resolved? To answer both questions, we use administrative data, survey data, and insights from group interviews with social housing associations and municipalities. Behind the answer is a multitude of reasons at various points throughout the planning process. Many problems stem from coordination challenges in a socio-economic environment that grows ever more complex. The notion of multi-level governance provides insights into the intricate web of interactions and negotiations. Based on this analysis, we offer recommendations for Flemish policy, local governments, and social housing associations.

## Keywords

coordination; multi-level governance; planning process; social housing

## 1. Introduction

In Flanders, it is widely acknowledged that there is a great need for more social housing. Unlike several other European countries that reduced subsidies for social housing following the 2008 global financial crisis, the

Flemish government has maintained its investment levels in social housing (De Decker et al., 2017). The total volume of subsidised loans from the Flemish government was increased in line with construction costs. Despite having the political will and available budget, the social housing agencies have struggled to make specific investment projects happen. By the end of 2021, only a fraction of the available credit had been allocated, leading to political discussion in the Flemish Parliament and the media (Vlaams Parlement, 2021).

Initially, our study set out to explore the broader factors contributing to these delays without using a predefined theoretical lens. Through this exploratory approach, it became clear that the challenges are deeply rooted in issues of multi-level governance (MLG), a framework that examines the interactions and coordination challenges among different levels of government involved in policy implementation. As we analysed the data and observed the coordination problems inherent in managing complex projects such as social housing investments, it became evident that MLG dynamics were at the heart of many of these issues. The expression used in the title “money isn’t the problem” was inspired by *The Irish Times* (in an issue dated October 14, 2020), which highlighted similar issues in social housing provision in Ireland, where delays were similarly not due to a lack of financial resources but rather to governance challenges.

Recognizing the importance of MLG, this article frames its analysis and discussion within the context of this theoretical framework. MLG, as articulated by Marks and Hooghe (2003), provides a useful lens for understanding how authority and policy responsibilities are dispersed across different governmental levels, from local to regional, national, and even supranational entities. This dispersal of authority is often accompanied by complex interdependencies among different levels of government, which can lead to coordination challenges that delay the implementation of complex projects, such as social housing investments. Scharpf (1997) also emphasises the difficulties inherent in this type of governance, where the “joint-decision trap” can emerge, resulting in policy inertia or suboptimal decisions due to the need for consensus across multiple actors and levels of government.

In addition to the insights provided by Marks and Hooghe, the work of Jacob Torfing, among others, on network governance offers valuable perspectives on how the interactions between various governmental levels and actors can either facilitate or hinder effective policy implementation (Torfing et al., 2012). This strand of literature highlights the fact that network governance, characterised by collaboration among public, private, and civil society actors, can enhance policy effectiveness by pooling resources and expertise. However, this approach also requires robust mechanisms for coordination and conflict resolution, which are often lacking in complex governance systems (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009).

In structuring the analysis around MLG, this article makes a contribution that is twofold: Firstly, it offers an empirical case study of investment delays in Flemish social housing, illustrating how MLG dynamics play out in practice; secondly, it contributes to the broader literature on MLG by providing insights into the specific challenges and coordination issues that arise in the context of social housing, a policy domain that has received limited attention in MLG research.

The article begins with a brief description of housing affordability and housing policy in Flanders (Section 2). It then explains how social housing in Flanders is provided and the procedures for planning investments (Section 3), and defines the MLG challenges in Flemish social housing (Section 4). Methodology and data are presented in Section 5. The analysis of the causes of delays and potential measures for accelerating

investments is covered in Section 6. The article ends with a discussion and recommendations in Section 7, and a conclusion in Section 8.

## 2. Housing Affordability and Housing Policy in Flanders

Belgium is a federal state with three regions: the Walloon Region, the Flemish Region, and the Brussels-Capital Region. Since the 1980s, housing policy has fallen under the competencies of the regions. Powers over housing policy instruments have gradually been transferred from the Belgian state to the regions. In the 1980s, this included responsibilities for social housing and allowances for households, as well as housing quality policies. Since 2000, fiscal powers have also been transferred: This initially included taxes on property transfers (sales and inheritances) and later, in 2015, the tax advantage for home ownership in personal income tax. In 2015, the regions also gained authority over rental legislation.

Flanders is the largest of the three Belgian regions and is one of Europe's most prosperous areas. In housing literature, it is known for its high rate of homeownership. According to EU-SILC 2022 data, the share of the population living in owner-occupied homes in Belgium is 72.5%, which is above the European average of 69.1% (Eurostat, 2024). With a share of 78%, homeownership in Flanders is the highest of the three Belgian regions and well above the European average (Heylen, 2023).

In line with evolutions in many European countries, Flemish housing prices have been rising quickly and with long-lasting effects, even after the global financial crisis. These price increases are the reason why the affordability of housing has become a frequently discussed topic among citizens, in the media, and in Parliament. However, this perception of increasing problems with affordability is not sustained by data based on sound definitions of housing affordability. A commonly used method to measure housing affordability is the expenditure-to-income ratio, which relates expenses for the rent (for tenants) or downpayment of mortgage loans (for owner-occupiers) to disposable household income. If households spend more than a predetermined standard on housing, they are considered to have a problem with affordability, or at least to be at risk of having a problem. Standards differ between countries, but 30% is frequently used (Meen & Whitehead, 2020) and is also applied in Flanders. Based on this measurement, housing in Flanders became gradually less affordable in the decades after the first measurement in 1976, but the problem has not worsened since 2013 (Winters, 2021). The Eurostat housing cost overburden (HCO) rate is a similar indicator that also includes the cost of heating, water, and electricity in housing expenses and uses a standard of 40%. The exact definition of the HCO rate is the percentage of the population living in households where the total housing costs ("net" of housing allowances) represent more than 40% of disposable income ("net" of housing allowances). For Flanders, the HCO rate (5.5%) is low compared to the EU average (7.8%) as well as neighbouring regions and countries, such as the Walloon Region (8.9%), the Brussels Capital Region (14.9%), the Netherlands (8.3%), and Germany (13.9%; figures for 2020 based on Heylen, 2023). However, this rather good average score hides large variations between groups and regions. Flanders is well known for having housing that is less affordable for private tenants than for owner-occupiers (Heylen, 2023), as well as for lower-income groups than for higher-income groups.

Improving the affordability of housing is one of the major objectives of housing policy in Flanders. The 1997 Flemish Housing Decree based the central mission of Flemish housing policy on the constitutional right to decent housing. The decree clearly states that the priority is on the housing needs of low-income households.

In terms of budgetary expenses, social housing is the most important policy instrument in Flanders for reaching the affordability goal. By the end of 2023, the total number of social housing units was 180,000 (Statistiek Vlaanderen, 2024), or 6% of the total housing stock. The significant differences between countries in the way social housing is defined and provided make it difficult to compare this percentage internationally, but in most international comparisons, the proportion of social housing in Belgium is labelled as “small” or “low” (OECD, 2020). The OECD Affordable Housing Database shows percentages above 20% for the Netherlands (34.1%), Austria (23.6%), and Denmark (21.3%), and between 10% and 20% for the United Kingdom (16.4%), France (14.0%), Ireland (11.1%), and Finland (10.9%). Within Belgium, the share of social housing is slightly lower in the Flemish region than in the two other regions. According to the classification of Scanlon et al. (2014), Flanders would be in the group with a “low” percentage of social rental housing (between 2% and 9%).

Access to social rental housing in Flanders is restricted to households below a specified income threshold. The allocation of dwellings is based on a combination of chronology and priority rules. As such, the Flemish social housing model is seen as an example of the targeted social housing model, in which the allocation of housing is based on low income, vulnerability, or specific needs. Alongside this “targeted model,” there is the “universalist model,” which is open to broad population groups (as in Sweden, the Netherlands, and Denmark) (Winters, 2023).

One of the main problems in Flemish social housing today is the large gap between the needs and the available stock. Almost half (46%) of the households, or 250,000 households, in the private rental market are estimated to be eligible for social housing (Heylen, 2019). This concerns a group for whom both housing affordability and housing quality are poor, on average. Moreover, the waiting list for social housing is long: By the end of 2022, approximately 176,000 households were registered as candidates for social housing. Each year, around 2,800 units are added to the social housing stock (Statistiek Vlaanderen, 2024). The average waiting time is over four years and can even reach up to 10 years in some areas.

### 3. MLG Challenges in Flemish Social Housing

The delays in social housing investments in Flanders can be better understood through the lens of MLG. As Marks and Hooghe (2003) explain, MLG is characterised by the dispersion of authority across multiple levels of government, creating complex interactions and potential coordination challenges. Drawing parallels with similar discussions in other European contexts, the notion of MLG offers a lens through which we can understand the intricate web of interactions and negotiations involved in policy-making and implementation (Eizaguirre et al., 2012; Rhodes, 2007).

In the context of Flemish social housing, these MLG challenges are particularly pronounced given the involvement of local, regional, and, in some cases, national authorities, each with their own roles, responsibilities, and policy instruments. Jacob Torfing’s work on network governance further illustrates the difficulties of coordination across multiple levels of government. Torfing et al. (2012) highlight the importance of network governance in managing the interdependencies between different actors and levels of government. However, these networks can also be sites of friction, where conflicting interests, priorities, and bureaucratic procedures lead to delays in decision-making and implementation.

MLG, introduced in the 1990s, captures the intricate nature of contemporary governance structures, characterised by their fragmented and collaborative nature (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). At its core, MLG involves negotiating power dynamics between different tiers of government and navigating through a network of expertise across various territorial and sectoral domains. Based on the documentation available, Table 1 provides an overview of the various roles and responsibilities of the four main actors involved in the governance of Flemish social housing.

**Table 1.** Roles and responsibilities of different levels of governance in Flemish social housing.

Level of governance	Key roles and responsibilities
Flemish government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Setting overall policy frameworks and regulations for social housing</li> <li>Providing funding and subsidies for construction and renovation</li> <li>Overseeing compliance with housing standards and laws</li> <li>Coordinating planning and production process of construction and renovation projects</li> </ul>
Local governments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identifying local housing needs and integrating them into regional strategies</li> <li>Facilitating land use and zoning approvals</li> <li>Providing support for project implementation at the local level</li> </ul>
Social housing associations (SHAs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Planning and executing construction and renovation projects</li> <li>Managing day-to-day operations of social housing units</li> <li>Ensuring tenant allocation based on eligibility criteria</li> <li>Reporting and collaborating with local and regional governments on project progress and needs</li> </ul>
Citizens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Engaging in consultation processes to provide feedback on housing needs and preferences</li> <li>Supporting (or not supporting) social housing policy</li> <li>Engaging in actions and consultation processes with respect to social housing projects in their neighbourhood</li> <li>Engaging in initiatives for mutual exchange between social tenants and other citizens</li> </ul>

It is already clear that, at least in this Flemish context, these MLG dynamics can manifest themselves in several ways. For example, local governments may have different priorities for, or interpretations of housing needs compared to regional authorities, or may apply slightly different building standards leading to delays in project approvals or discrepancies in the allocation of resources. Additionally, the involvement of multiple agencies and layers of bureaucracy can complicate the planning and execution of social housing projects, as each level of government may have its own procedures and requirements, further slowing down the process.

These MLG challenges are not unique to social housing. Similar issues have been observed in other large and complex projects, such as infrastructure development and environmental policy, where the coordination of multiple actors and levels of government is critical to success but often leads to significant delays (Scharpf, 1997; Torfing et al., 2012). While we may not have concrete examples from other domains or countries at hand, similar MLG challenges are conceivable in various contexts. For instance, comparable issues might arise in areas such as healthcare funding, educational reform, and environmental sustainability projects, where coordination across different levels of government and diverse stakeholders can lead to delays and inefficiencies like those observed in the development of Flemish social housing.

By positioning the case of Flemish social housing within this broader context of MLG literature, this article contributes to our understanding of how governance structures impact policy implementation, particularly in sectors that require extensive coordination across different levels of government.

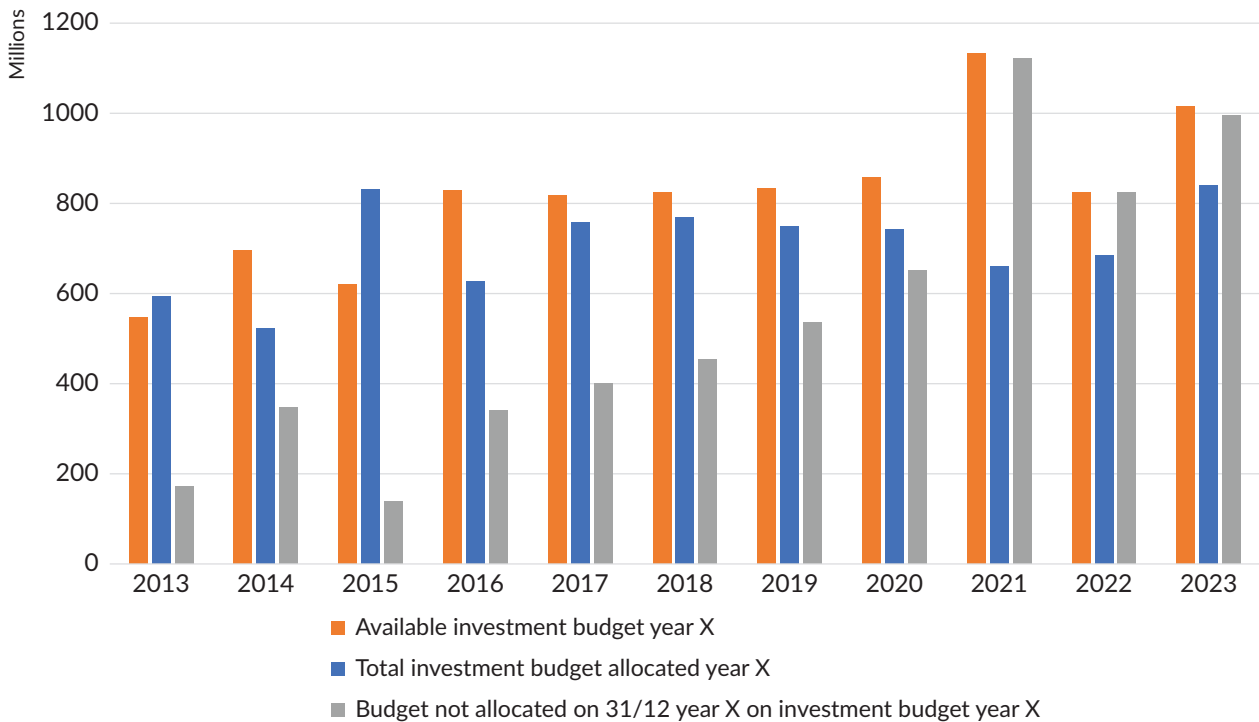
#### 4. Social Housing Provision in Flanders

Until (mid) 2023, almost all social housing (99%) in Flanders was provided by two types of organisations: social housing associations (SHAs) and social rental agencies (SRAs). SHAs, which have been in operation since the end of the 19th century, manage over 90% of all social dwellings. These not-for-profit organisations own the social housing stock and primarily expand it through new construction projects. SRAs were established in the aftermath of the economic crisis of the 1970s. These organisations rent dwellings on the private rental market and then sublet these dwellings to low-income and vulnerable households. The Flemish government required both SHAs and SRAs to merge into “housing companies” by July 2023. The housing companies took over all activities previously carried out by SHAs and SRAs. The reform also included a radical redistribution of the areas covered by each social housing provider as well as a thorough reform of the allocation rules in 2024 (Winters, 2023).

In this article, we focus on the social housing provided by SHAs before the transition to housing companies. SHAs are legally autonomous organisations, but due to detailed regulations, their autonomy is in fact limited. Access and allocation are strictly regulated at the Flemish level, and SHAs are restricted to social housing activities. They are prohibited from investing in commercial real estate and can only sell dwellings in exceptional circumstances. The rent is determined by a formula outlined in Flemish legislation, considering market value, household income, and composition. To bridge the gap between the cost and rent revenues, SHAs can apply for various subsidies. Government loans at an interest rate of  $-1\%$  for a term of 33 years are particularly significant. Additionally, brick-and-mortar subsidies (i.e., for demolition, land building, infrastructure works, community facilities, and energy-saving investments) and several fiscal benefits are available. Given that SHAs experiencing operating losses receive a subsidy to offset financial gaps, the Flemish government essentially ensures a financial balance (Winters & Van den Broeck, 2020).

Figure 1 depicts the evolution of the volume of subsidised loans within the Flemish government's budget since 2013 and their allocation to various projects. The total investment budget (highlighted in orange) increases annually, roughly in line with the index for construction prices. In 2021, the government implemented a one-off extra budget of 250 million euros as part of the post-pandemic recovery policy. Historically, the budget was divided based on a fixed ratio between new construction (55%) and renovation (45%).

If the available investment budget is not fully allocated to projects within the budget year, it can be carried over to the following year, but only for one year. Figure 1 shows that since 2015, the budget that is allocated annually (in blue) has not mirrored the upward trend seen in the available investment budget. This discrepancy suggests increasing difficulties in allocating the credits to specific projects. The grey bars in the figure represent the budget for each year that remained unassigned to any project during the same year. Notably, these grey bars lengthen each year between 2015 and 2021. This means that projects are increasingly allocated using the budget from the previous year.



**Figure 1.** Budget and allocation of budget for social housing in Flanders since 2013, in million euros. Source: Housing Agency Flanders (2024).

The situation has become particularly alarming over the last three years, with only a small fraction of the budget being allocated by the end of each year. Although this could partially be explained by the additional budget in 2021, the data show that the issue persisted throughout 2022 and 2023, leading to an increased risk of losing the available investment budgets for social housing.

In 2021, the Minister of Housing responded by reallocating a portion of the budget initially earmarked for new construction of social housing to renovation of existing social housing. Additionally, part of the budget was redirected to other housing policy instruments, such as subsidised credit for owner-occupation. Notably, the underutilisation of 438 million euros in cheap credit from the 2021 budget was converted into 12.8 million euros in subsidies under a new system of subsidised “affordable rental housing.” The system is intended to encourage private developers to invest in mixed projects of affordable, social housing and private rental housing. The developer receives a subsidy to rent out the property below market rents. For social rental, the income thresholds are the same as for other social housing, while for affordable rental, the threshold is set higher. The concept of “affordable housing” is also gaining prominence in other European countries. Although the term lacks a precise definition, it generally refers to housing that is offered below market price and is accessible to households whose income exceeds the threshold for social housing. This category bridges the gap between subsidised social housing and the open market (Czischke & van Bortel, 2018). So, in reality, the delay in utilising government loans for social housing paved the way for a shift from social housing to affordable housing.

However, the delay in social housing production also prompted the Flemish Minister of Housing to commission an investigation into the causes and possible measures to resolve the issue. This study is analysed in the following paragraphs (see also Dockx et al., 2023).

In order to gain a thorough understanding of the causes of the delays, we first delve into the administrative procedure for allocating projects to annual budgets. This process, which is represented in Figure 2, involves five stages, separated by a moment of decision.

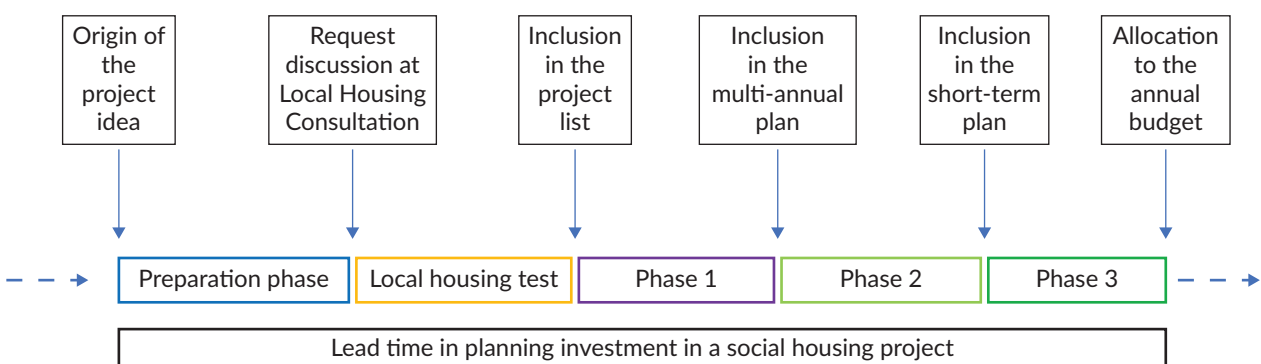
Every investment project begins with a project idea. During this phase, discussions commence with the local municipality. As the project becomes more concrete, the SHA creates a project profile in the Project Portal, an online tool provided by the Housing Agency Flanders that facilitates administrative project tracking. For projects involving substantial renovation works, an assessment known as the “renovation test” is conducted at the agency. Upon receiving a favourable assessment, the SHA can request a discussion at the Local Housing Consultation, which involves various local stakeholders.

The municipality takes the initiative in organising this consultation. It evaluates the project in alignment with its own policies and the Binding Social Objective (BSO), a target for the additional number of social housing units of the municipality set by the Flemish government. Additionally, the municipality considers whether the public infrastructure qualifies for inclusion in the municipal public domain. If the project successfully passes this evaluation, the agency adds it to the list of approved projects.

In what is formally known as phase 1, the SHA submits a preliminary design of the project to the agency. After receiving positive feedback from the project manager at the agency and the assessment committee, the project is included in the multi-annual plan. This plan outlines projects that can be executed within a 3-year timeframe.

During phase 2, the SHA begins the search for a contractor to carry out the construction work. Compliance with public procurement laws is obligatory. The SHA informs the agency about the tender process, necessary permits, and required notifications. Based on this information, the assessment committee decides whether to include the project in the short-term plan, which lists projects that can be executed within four months.

In phase 3, the SHA informs the Agency about the awarding of the contract. At this point, the project is allocated a budget. With funding secured, the contractor can start the construction work.



**Figure 2.** Administrative procedure to be followed by SHAs in planning social housing investments. Source: Dockx et al. (2023).



## 5. Methodology and Data

This research combines multiple data sources and research methods. The administrative dataset from the Project Portal serves as a primary data source. This portal acts as a centralised platform for tracking project management and administrative processes related to specific investment projects. It provides details at the project level, including the nature of investments, the number of dwellings, and timelines for various steps in the administrative process.

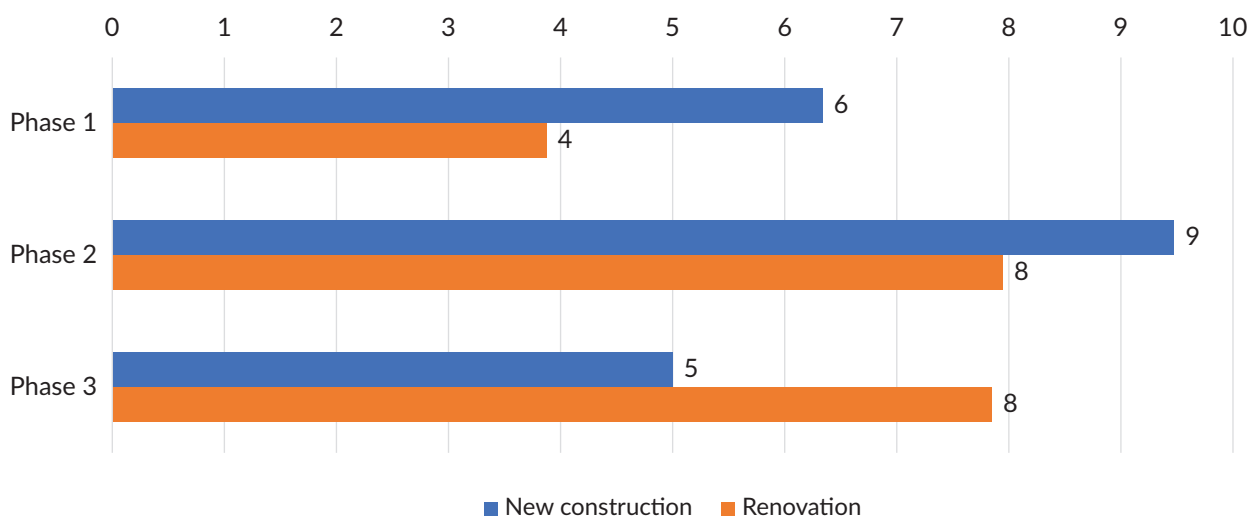
In addition to the analysis of these administrative data, two slightly different online surveys were conducted. One targeted all SHA directors. The other involved the mayors of all Flemish municipalities. The response rate was 66% for SHAs and 40% for municipalities. The sample obtained was representative in terms of regional distribution. The survey aimed to explore explanations for the differences in lead time and identify measures to achieve shorter lead times and increased investment pace.

The survey yielded an extensive list of potential recommendations. Consequently, three group discussions were organised, involving 10 representatives from SHAs and local authorities, including both political and administrative representatives. Participants assessed the potential impact and desirability of possible measures. “Desirability” was defined as specifying whether the measure is generally desirable and whether there are any significant negative consequences associated with it. The proposed measures were categorised into four groups: decisions by the Flemish government; the Housing Agency Flanders; local governments; and SHAs.

## 6. Analysis

### 6.1. How Long Does the Administrative Process Take?

In Figure 3 we present the lead times (expressed in median months) based on the data in the project portal. The preparation phase is not included here, as there are no registration obligations yet. For new construction



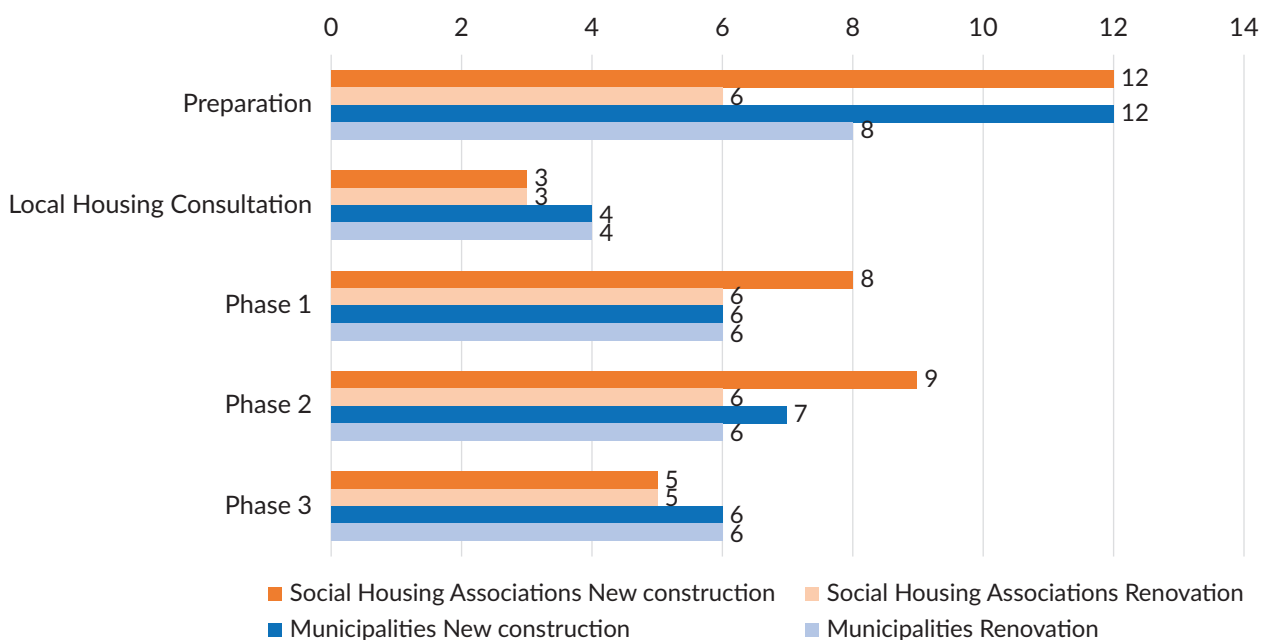
**Figure 3.** Lead time in months (median), per phase, based on data in the project portal. Source: Dockx et al. (2023).

projects, phase 2 (from inclusion in the multi-annual plan to inclusion in the short-term plan) is the longest. For renovation projects, both phase 2 and 3 (from inclusion in the short-term plan to allocation to the annual budget) take longer than phase 1. The total lead time is 24 months for new construction projects and slightly less, 21 months, for renovation projects (median).

Figure 4 shows the views of SHAs and municipalities regarding the lead time per phase based on the surveys, and includes the two phases preceding formal registration, in addition to the information shown in Figure 3. For new construction projects, the preparatory phase clearly seems to consume the most time (with a median duration of up to a full year), according to both the surveyed SHAs and municipalities. For renovation projects, the preparation phase typically takes half as long.

The local housing consultations phase usually lasts three to four months (which is close to the maximum time allowed for this phase). The views of SHAs concerning phases 1, 2, and 3 fairly accurately reflect the findings from the project portal data. Based on the experiences of SHAs, the total lead time, including preparation and the local housing test, amounts to three years (37 months) for new construction and two years (26 months) for renovation. A general remark is that the lead times vary significantly according to the type of project and the local context.

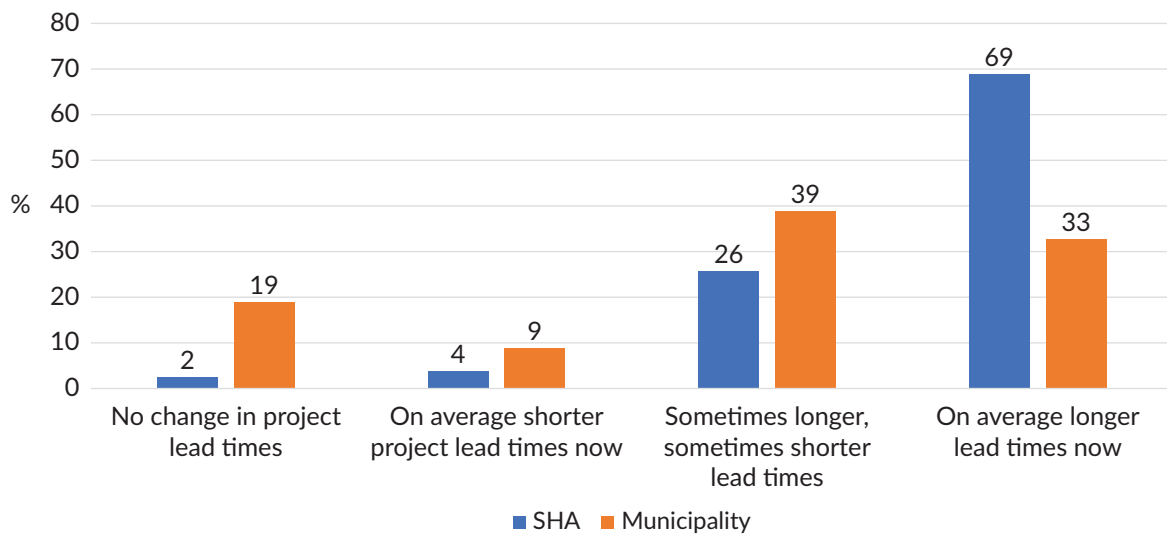
The problem of long lead times in Flanders is not specific to social housing. In a recent study on the lead time for housing developments in Belgium in general, Vastmans (2024) found an average lead time of 40 months starting from the preparation of the project until the deliverance of the building permit. A wide variety in lead times among projects was also observed here.



**Figure 4.** Lead time in months (median), per phase, based on surveys with SHA and municipalities. Source: Dockx et al. (2023).

In the debate on lead times for investments in social housing, a prevailing perception is that both building and renovating social housing take longer now than they did in the past. Unfortunately, administrative data on social housing investments, to verify the change in lead times compared to ten years ago, are not available as

the project portal has not been in use for that many years. To gain insights into this alleged evolution, we asked municipalities and SHAs in the survey to indicate to what extent they perceive that social housing projects take more or less time to implement than 10 years ago. Figure 5 validates these claims: It shows that SHAs in particular find the lead time for new social housing to be longer on average than 10 years ago (two out of three SHAs confirm this statement). This perception is slightly less pronounced among the municipalities surveyed, where one in three indicates that lead times in developing social housing projects are on average longer now than ten years ago.

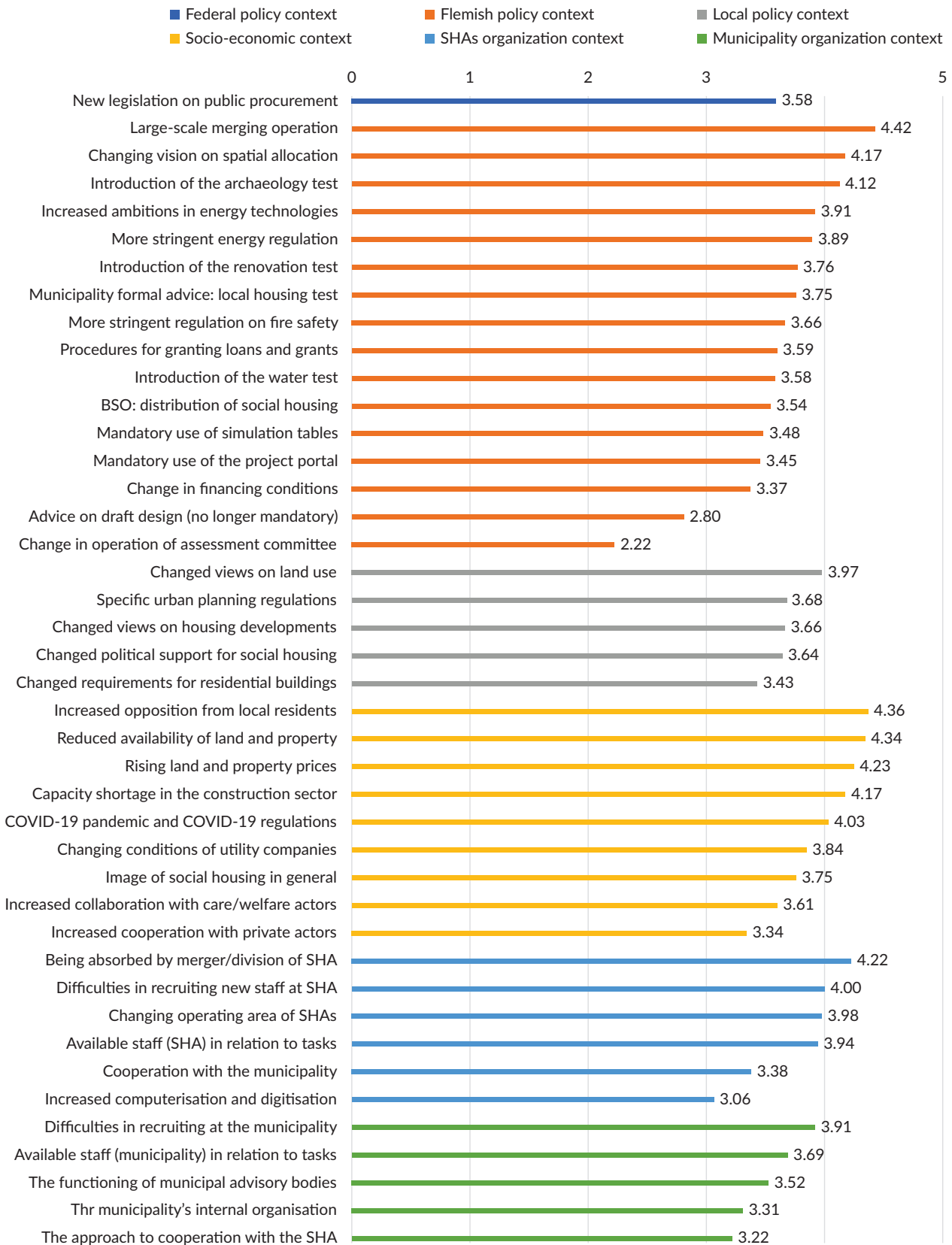


**Figure 5.** Perceptions on average lead time of social housing projects, compared to 10 years ago, based on surveys with SHAs and municipalities (%). Source: Dockx et al. (2023).

## 6.2. What Factors Cause Delays and Underutilisation?

To find out what causes the long(er) lead times, a list of factors that could potentially accelerate or delay the process was presented in the survey. Respondents could indicate, using a score from 1 to 5, whether the factor had been *accelerating* (1–2), *delaying* (4–5), or *not affecting* (3) the process. We distinguished between different contexts for accelerating/delaying factors: (a) the federal level, (b) the Flemish level (which includes the Flemish government level and the Housing Agency implementing policy), (c) the local policy level, (d) societal and economic contextual factors, and the organisational levels of (e) the SHA and (f) the municipality. The median scores are presented in Figure 6. The figure clearly shows that delaying factors are not located within one specific context and can be of very differing natures.

Concerning changes in the policy context, changes at the Flemish government level are seen as the most significant in terms of their effect on lead times. Respondents from SHAs and municipalities indicated that the large-scale merging operation and changing views on land use are two key factors that have led to longer lead times. In addition, respondents identified the requirement of formal advice from the municipality, increased energy ambitions, stricter energy regulations, the requirement to present an archaeology test and renovation test, and the aforementioned BSO as factors that have often led to slight delays. On the contrary, the change in the operation of the assessment committee (more frequent assessments) is seen as an aspect that has led to shorter lead times. Replacing the mandatory evaluation of the draft design of the project by the Housing Agency Flanders with advice only is also perceived as an aspect that has slightly shortened lead times.



**Figure 6.** Median impact of factors causing acceleration and delay according to context (scale: 1 = *strongly accelerating* and 5 = *strongly delaying*; 3 = *no change*), based on surveys with SHAs and municipalities. Source: Dockx et al. (2023).

At the local policy level, changed views on land use (e.g., the preferred location of social housing and policy objectives concerning the density of neighbourhoods) is, according to SHAs, an aspect that has clearly caused the most delays on average. Changes in political support for social housing, specific urban planning regulations (e.g., the mandatory number of parking spaces) and the vision of the municipality regarding the desired housing developments (e.g., the desired housing typology) are reportedly also elements that, on average, have slightly lengthened the lead time, according to SHAs.

At the federal policy level, only one factor must be mentioned: rules on public procurement. According to both SHAs and municipalities, new federal legislation on public procurement has marginally lengthened lead times due to the complexity of regulations, administrative burdens, and requirements concerning verification, correctness, and completeness.

Besides policy choices at all these levels, societal and economic context factors such as increasing citizen participation or resistance from local residents, lower availability and rising prices of land and properties, and the (negative) image of social housing are also cited as significant delaying factors. A shortage of personnel in the construction sector can lead to putting projects out to tender several times.

We also asked SHA directors about which organisational changes within their organisation have affected lead times over the past decade. Mergers and splits had the biggest impact in their opinion, while other changes, such as difficulties with the recruitment of new (technical) staff, revision of operating areas, limited staffing, and difficulties in cooperation with municipalities, also slightly lengthened lead times. Finally, differing views to local governments often lead to prolonged decision-making processes or even revisions of decisions, further contributing to delays.

Finally, the organisational context also plays a role for municipalities. According to respondents, the context of local governments has changed significantly compared to 10 years ago. Municipalities point to difficulties in hiring new staff, especially for specific profiles such as urban planners, as a major factor. The limited staffing, the time needed for passing municipal advisory bodies, and the lack of cooperation between different actors at the local level are further mentioned as possible causes of delays in lead times.

### **6.3. What Measures Do SHAs and Local Authorities Consider to Be Effective?**

In the surveys, respondents could suggest measures and instruments to reduce lead times. We used the answers to these questions to arrive at a more structured list of measures and presented this list to the participants in the group interviews with representatives of SHAs and local authorities. For each measure, we asked the participants about their view on the expected impact on lead times, but also whether they perceived the measure as desirable or not. The following is an overview of the main aspects identified by participants in the group interviews as effective in shortening the process. Given the multifaceted nature of the causes, the proposed measures reflect a similar complexity.

The proposed measures to reduce lead times focus primarily on Flemish policy, such as procedures, regulations, financing, obligations on municipalities, and use of space. There is a consensus on fostering more trust in housing companies. Some respondents suggest increasing the autonomy of housing companies, while others advocate maintaining clear frameworks and guidelines to ensure the quality of the projects.

Respondents also suggest better coordination between Flemish policy domains (e.g., housing, welfare, and spatial planning) and setting up a consultative body at the Flemish level for this purpose. Other suggestions focus on the features of the system of government credit, aiming in general to make investments more financially balanced, e.g., with a better differentiation of subsidy levels according to neighbourhood characteristics, better coverage of operating costs of SHAs, or financial facilitation of new models of acquisition (e.g., the purchase of vacant buildings). There was broad consensus for (re)introducing social housing obligations in private developments. Some respondents advocated for releasing building protection from protected areas, albeit with the aim of fostering a social mix. Improving the image of social housing (among citizens and local politicians) is also considered important, as is creating a sense of urgency among local authorities.

According to respondents, the Housing Agency Flanders could also take on various policy initiatives to contribute to expediting investment. This includes organising cross-policy consultations to make unused land and premises from other Flemish government agencies available for social housing. Under the Land and Property Decree, municipalities are required to draw up an inventory of land and premises that are vacant or unbuilt. By analogy with those regulations, the Flemish public services could also pursue a more active policy of stocktaking regarding land and premises. Consultation with the Environment Department (responsible for spatial planning) on conditions for land use for social housing projects was considered impactful. Further optimisation of the project portal, for example by adding concrete planning tools, could serve as a working tool for housing companies facilitating the planning process. It was also suggested that the tasks and competencies of the Housing Agency as a service provider and knowledge institution should be strengthened, for example by offering training courses on new building and renovation techniques. Although there are some reservations among some respondents, the promotion and development of rapid construction formulas (such as prefabrication) was also seen as impactful and desirable, although federal public procurement legislation may make their application difficult.

At the local policy level, several proposals aim to boost investment in social housing by establishing a permanent consultation between municipal departments and housing companies and appointing a project coordinator or task force for major projects. However, some respondents acknowledged that difficulties may arise in setting up such a project team and that the impact can vary depending on the scale of the municipality. One proposal supported by many participants is a long-term strategic plan that covers various policy fields, but many respondents do not see how to implement this in practice. Better alignment of local building codes with social housing design guidelines is also welcomed. Communication, creating a community spirit by promoting neighbourhood events and mutual contact initiatives between residents, for example, can improve the image of and build support for social housing. There was little opposition to proposals to exchange land rights, but their impact was deemed minor. Proposals to allow higher building densities for social housing projects were not considered desirable by respondents.

An easy way for SHAs to increase and accelerate investment in social housing would be to concentrate on simple projects, with fewer stakeholders, less need for coordination, and fewer spatial planning challenges, but such a strategy may prove to come at the expense of project quality and further innovation, and in urban contexts it is also not a realistic strategy. Appointing a project manager at the SHA to actively prospect for land and vacant properties, along with financial support for such prospecting is mentioned as impactful and desirable.

## 7. Discussion and Recommendations

In this article, we have delved into the complexities surrounding the slow progress of constructing and renovating social housing, along with the underutilisation of allocated budgets. Through an exploration of the institutional context and an analysis of administrative data, complemented by insights from surveys and group discussions with SHAs and municipalities, we aimed to shed light on these issues. Contrary to common discourse that (a lack of) funding is the sole cause of failure to invest in social housing, our findings suggest a more nuanced reality. The slow pace of investment in social housing projects cannot be simplistically attributed to a single factor such as financial constraints but emerges as the outcome of a complex interplay of various factors.

The interplay of these MLG dynamics is apparent in the realm of social housing, where addressing issues such as lead time and investments requires joint efforts and negotiations among stakeholders at different levels. Our analysis portrays the Flemish social housing sector as a complex ecosystem, with the Flemish government setting the overarching policy framework, municipalities overseeing local implementation, and SHAs taking charge of on-the-ground operations. Yet, during our group discussions with both SHAs and municipalities, it became evident that amidst these interactions, it is crucial not to overlook the voices and experiences of citizens. Social tenants and prospective tenants are the ones directly affected by the inadequacies in social housing provision, experiencing first-hand the consequences of prolonged waiting times and insufficient investment. Citizens in general are important for the public support social housing receives; more specifically, protests by residents against social housing projects in their neighbourhood appear to have a significant impact on lead times.

By embracing an MLG perspective, we can dissect the impact of policy decisions, governance structures, and planning practices on the regulation, financing, development, and execution of social housing projects. This comprehensive approach offers valuable lessons not only for Flanders but also for other regions and countries grappling with similar challenges. The Irish case, for instance, demonstrates a lot of similarities. Countries with decentralised governance systems or those undergoing social housing reforms can particularly benefit from understanding the complex interdependencies highlighted in this study. Only through such nuanced analyses can we pave the way for sustainable and effective solutions to the challenges afflicting the social housing sector.

From an MLG perspective, various recommendations can be formulated to address the multifaceted challenges of investments in social housing. Insights from the Project Portal, surveys, and group discussions highlight the crucial need for enhanced collaboration between the Flemish government, municipalities, and SHAs. While these actors often have competing logics (Mullins, 2006), their interests are similar and we can identify several measures that make navigating these competing logics easier and can better address the challenges of investment pace and resource utilisation in the social housing domain.

An initial recommendation is to further develop the Agency for Housing in Flanders as a knowledge institution for housing companies and to enhance support in consultation with the sector. Regarding design guidelines, there should be greater flexibility at the Flemish level concerning deviations from these recommendations, while at the local level, more consideration should be given to Flemish design guidelines. It is imperative to foster a more permanent dialogue among various stakeholders to ensure that support aligns well with the sector's needs.

Another clear recommendation is to promote greater collaboration and dialogue between local governments, housing corporations, and other local actors. For example, municipalities can actively search for land and properties suitable for social housing and better utilise the available finance systems for purchasing land in this endeavour. Additionally, consideration could be given to establishing a permanent dialogue between the housing companies and relevant municipal services.

Furthermore, the Flemish government could enhance coordination and collaboration between different policy domains and relevant services. This could involve establishing a permanent coordination mechanism or dialogue involving representatives from the relevant Flemish policy domains. Additionally, the Flemish government could explore possibilities for leveraging public buildings owned by other (Flemish) entities for the construction of new social housing units or conversion to social housing. Such strategies could be of interest to other countries that face challenges in coordinating between various levels of government and sectors in their social housing policies.

From an MLG perspective, it is also crucial for all these actors to collaborate more effectively to improve the image of social housing. This can be achieved through more constructive communication, highlighting positive stories, and promoting interaction between social tenants and neighbours (van Bortel et al., 2019). By working together to improve the image of social housing, broader societal support for social housing could be cultivated, indirectly leading to more projects being implemented at a faster pace. In this regard, respondents also caution against the potentially negative impact of recent Flemish policy measures on the image of social tenants and, consequently, social housing. Improving the public perception of social housing is not unique to Flanders; this is a challenge that many countries face. The recommendations provided here can serve as a blueprint for other regions aiming to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for social housing development.

## 8. Conclusion

The central question in this article is how to explain the delay in the provision of social housing in Flanders in a context where the need for more social housing is widely acknowledged and funds are available. Based on an analysis of administrative data, survey data, and insights from group interviews with representatives of SHAs and municipalities, we conclude that the delay in supply does not have one single cause but can be explained by a wide range of reasons at different points in the planning process. These reasons find their roots in legislation or administrative procedures at different policy levels but can as well be found in the socio-economic context and within the organisational context of SHAs and municipalities.

Many of the problems seem to originate in the mechanisms of coordination in a socio-economic environment that is becoming more and more complex. Given the multifaceted nature of the causes, the proposed measures reflect a similar complexity. The notion of MLG offers a lens through which we can understand the intricate web of interactions and negotiations involved and leads to a range of recommendations for regional (Flemish) policy, for local governments, and for SHAs.

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### Conflict of Interests

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## About the Authors



**Sien Winters** is head of the research unit Social and Economic Policy and Social Inclusion at the Research Institute for Work and Society (HIVA), KU Leuven. She also is the coordinator of the Policy Research Centre Housing, an interdisciplinary research centre financed by the Flemish government. Her main research topic is finance and the organisation of social housing.



**Emmanuel Dockx** has a PhD in social sciences, with a specific focus in public governance, public–private collaboration, and social housing issues. He currently works as a data consultant in the Province of Antwerp, Belgium.



**Katleen Van den Broeck** has a PhD in economics and works as a research expert at the Research Institute for Work and Society (HIVA), KU Leuven. She primarily focuses on the theme of housing and the connection with health, well-being, energy, and sustainable cities. She works on topics such as renovation barriers (for vulnerable households), take-up of support measures (for housing), and social housing.