

1.3. Key messages

- **The adequacy of the CSRs and NRPs in addressing the main socio-economic challenges was questioned.** These documents sometimes fail to strike a balance between economic and social objectives. Specific concerns are the decrease in the number of CSRs in the area of social inclusion and the lack of attention given to the role of local public social services.
- **Participation of local public social services in the European Semester needs to be addressed to improve ownership of the process.** Whilst most organisations at national level know of the national body responsible for drafting and implementing the NRPs, the situation is very different when it comes to social affairs departments in regional and local authorities, who often found out about the process through work conducted with ESN. Public social services at the local level have hardly been involved in drafting the NRP, or consulted. With a view to creating more ownership of the process, this is an issue that needs to be addressed.
- **Ensuring financial sustainability outweighs social objectives.** While the importance of macroeconomic stability and budgetary discipline is recognised, in many cases budgetary cuts have entailed a reduction of local government budgets and impacted on social policy funding, design and implementation. Increasingly, ensuring financial sustainability seems to outweigh other objectives, including ensuring equal access to social and healthcare services.
- **The lack of coordination between government levels needs to be further addressed.** An unclear and sometimes overlapping or imbalanced distribution of competences and funding as well as a lack of coordination between the relevant levels of government was raised as a key concern that was not sufficiently addressed in the NRPs and CSRs.
- **Social inclusion strategies should be developed along the concept of social sustainability.** These strategies, which are missing in a number of EU Member States, are key in improving people's quality of life, in addition to labour market integration.
- **Childcare is key to promote children's development, prevent the inheritance of social disadvantage and facilitate parents' access to the labour market.** Ensuring access to services for children from disadvantaged backgrounds deserves special attention.
- **Long-term care provisions should be further developed,** especially with regards to the availability and quality of home and community care services, and the provision of adequate training to carers.
- **The issue of housing exclusion needs to be addressed** as it is no longer limited to the most vulnerable groups and increasingly concern people from middle classes.
- **Concerns were raised about the sustainability of EU-funded projects.** The **European Structural and Investment Funds** – in particular, the European Social Fund (ESF) – play a major role in financing social services in EU Member States. While this is seen as a positive development, concerns arose about the long-term sustainability of EU-funded projects.
- **Further attention needs to be given to evaluation and quality assessment** of policies and programmes implemented across Member States. For both financial and ethical reasons, social policy impact evaluation is key and should be integrated into policy and service planning from the start. Greater emphasis should be put on the identification and the cross-national dissemination of successful policies, programmes and methodologies.

4. Country profiles and 2016 Recommendations

The Group members were asked to provide one recommendation they would like the European Commission to make to their country in the framework of the 2016 European Semester process. Recommendations are followed by a short explanation of the rationale behind them.

4.1. Overview table

Country	Recommendation
Belgium	<p>Develop joined up approaches between all government levels to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The recent administrative reform should be accompanied by a clearer framework for cooperation between the federal and regional levels, and between regions themselves.
Bulgaria	<p>Develop integrated care services for these vulnerable groups: children in care, Roma, and people with disabilities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Better coordination of all agencies, especially in the field of social support and employment, could help provide long-lasting solutions for the most vulnerable.
Czech Republic	<p>Implement a reform of long term-care public services: develop uniform procedures around quality, financing and outcome measurement.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The country profile highlights the need to improve social services planning and provision through uniform procedures across regions, an effective quality control system, transparent financing and procurement procedures and long-term outcome measurement.
Denmark	<p>Build on the concept of “social sustainability” to develop social services beyond employability and reach out to vulnerable groups.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ As documented by the EC country report and the country profile in this publication, the Danish social welfare system has had difficulties to reach out to certain groups such as immigrants, people with mental health problems and homeless people, in the fight against poverty and social exclusion.
Estonia	<p>Develop uniform quality standards for coordinated planning and management of social services across the country, especially in long-term care.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Important gaps continue to exist in social services provision at local level, particularly around services’ availability.
Finland	<p>Monitor the new government’s programme related to the reform of health and social care services.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The impact of the reform on public budgets and personal households, on the quality and coverage of services (notably health and social care), on employment, and on older people in particular, should be looked at.
France	<p>Shift focus (and funding) from active labour market policies (ALMPs) to combatting early school leaving.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ France has invested heavily in ALMPs and subsidised jobs, whereas there is no clear evidence of their impact on labour market inclusion. Evidence suggests that other measures, such as preventing school drop-outs, should now be developed.
Germany	<p>Develop an overall strategy seeking better outcomes for children.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ This strategy has been missing so far and it is needed to improve outcomes for children, particularly the most disadvantaged; for instance, through inclusive education and increased ECEC provision and participation.
Hungary	<p>Evaluate the Public Work Scheme and its outcomes on participants, labour markets and businesses.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Hungary has invested heavily in these publicly subsidised jobs, whose impact on the labour market and local economies could be detrimental.
Ireland	<p>Increase the availability of social housing for households and individuals.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The housing situation has reached crisis point. Waiting lists are increasing. Social welfare recipients, low-paid workers and families are most at risk.

Italy	<p>Grant a homogeneous level of basic services throughout the country.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ A European definition of a basic level of social services could help Italy to rationalise and better target service provision throughout the country.
Latvia	<p>Establish guidelines for local authorities' involvement in shaping social policy and standards for social services.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Local authorities play a major role in implementing services. A framework for their involvement in policy formulation at an early stage should be introduced. This is particularly true regarding the transition to community-based services.
Lithuania	<p>Review the impact of the 2012 social assistance reform on poverty reduction and social inclusion.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ It remains unclear how the impact of the reform will be monitored. In particular, there is a need for clear guidelines on the implementation of community-based services.
The Netherlands	<p>Assess the impact of the decentralisation reform from a social inclusion perspective.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The decentralisation reform has increased the responsibilities at the local level, while budgets have decreased. This major shift should be implemented in a way that leaves no one behind.
Poland	<p>Reform the social protection system, specifically long-term care and informal carers provisions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Social protection in Poland needs restructuring. This could be done by redesigning and better targeting social assistance measures (benefits and allowances for different groups), and by developing long-term care and respite care services for family members, which currently do not exist.
Portugal	<p>Adopt a long-term strategic plan against poverty.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Poverty in Portugal has dramatically increased over the last few years. Emergency measures have been introduced (social canteens), but without being part of a comprehensive strategy.
Romania	<p>Introduce legislative mechanisms that will create the conditions to empower local authorities to implement social services.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ A coherent framework should be implemented giving more autonomy to the local level regarding planning and evaluating services on the basis of the needs of the local communities.
Slovakia	<p>Assess the sustainability of community care services funded with EU funds.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ European funding should be well targeted and used in line with development priorities identified and agreed at regional level. The sustainability of EU-funded community-care services beyond 2020 should also be looked at.
Slovenia	<p>Ensure the effectiveness of social services in the light of increasing needs and decreasing human and financial resources.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The implementation gap of social services in Slovenia must be addressed. The financing of social inclusion measures at the local level is challenged.
Spain	<p>Introduce a guaranteed minimum income scheme.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ During the crisis, disadvantaged families have struggled to meet their basic needs. A minimum income scheme could help counterbalance precariousness and inequalities and reduce poverty and social exclusion.
Sweden	<p>Develop a national and inclusive housing policy based on cooperation between public and private stakeholders.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Housing shortages are affecting an increasing number of people in Sweden. This calls for an active government-led policy, in cooperation with local authorities and building and housing companies (both responsible for delivering the policy on the ground).
United Kingdom	<p>Empower local authorities to develop public housing for vulnerable groups (e.g. older people, social welfare recipients, people with disabilities, children in/or leaving care).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Housing subsidies should be replaced by an increased supply of genuinely affordable housing to meet the growing demand, especially for temporary accommodation, which is one of the biggest challenges facing local authorities across the UK.