European Social Network

The Social Services Network for Europe

Connecting Europe with local communities

Social services priorities for the European Semester 2017

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"These are extraordinary times. The challenges facing us are numerous: achieving an economic recovery which benefits all, notably the weaker parts of our societies; reducing unemployment, especially among the young; strengthening fairness and the social dimension of our single market; managing migration flows and our common borders; (...) and resisting the rise of all forms of extremism that are incompatible with our fundamental European values."

Jean-Claude Juncker, State of the Union 2016, 14 September 2016

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Working at EU level

Connecting Europe with local communities

Social services priorities for the European Semester 2017

Planning local public social services

About the European Social Network (ESN)

The European Social Network (ESN) is the independent network for local public social services in Europe. It brings together people who plan, finance, research, manage, regulate and deliver local public social services, including health, social welfare, employment, education and housing. We support the development of effective social policy and social care practice through the exchange of knowledge and experience.

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About this report

This report has been written by Marianne Doyen, Policy Officer, and Alfonso Lara Montero, Policy Director (ESN), with key inputs from Bart Vanhercke, Director, and Sebastiano Sabato, Researcher (European Social Observatory - OSE). The content is based on the answers to 25 individual questionnaires, produced by the ESN secretariat and completed by the 25 members of ESN's Reference Group on the European Semester. Group members analysed the report drafted by the European Commission for their countries, with the view to identify social policy priorities for the 2017 European Semester process.

The Reference Group was launched in 2014. It aims to give visibility to social issues and the challenges faced by public social services at local level within the framework of the European Semester – the cycle of economic and social policy coordination between the EU and its Member States.

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Abbreviations

Countries

AT	AUSTRIA
BE	BELGIUM
CY	CYPRUS
CZ	CZECH REPUBLIC
DK	DENMARK
DE	GERMANY
EE	ESTONIA
EL	GREECE
ES	SPAIN
IE	IRELAND
FI	FINLAND
FR	FRANCE
HR	CROATIA
HU	HUNGARY
IT	ITALY
LV	LATVIA
LT	LITHUANIA
NL	THE NETHERLANDS
PL	POLAND
PT	PORTUGAL
RO	ROMANIA
SE	SWEDEN
SI	SLOVENIA
UK	UNITED KINGDOM

Others

EU	EUROPEAN UNION
EC	EUROPEAN COMMISSION
CSR	COUNTRY-SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATION(S)
NRP	NATIONAL REFORM PROGRAMME
ESIF	EUROPEAN STRUCTURAL AND INVESTMENT FUNDS
ESF	EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND
DI	DEINSTITUTIONALISATION

1. Public social services and the European Semester

Definitions for the highlighted terms can be found in the glossary in section 6.1.

ESN's Reference Group on the European Semester

As part of its four-year strategy 2014-2017, the European Social Network (ESN) launched a Reference Group (hereafter 'the Group') to give greater prominence to social issues and the challenges faced by social services in the framework of the European Semester, the cycle of economic and social policy coordination that takes place between the EU and its Member States. The members of the Group hold managerial responsibilities in local and regional authorities, where they plan, manage and implement social services, and within social care and social work professional associations[1].

Public social services at local level have a major role in implementing policies aimed at the social inclusion of all groups, especially the most vulnerable. As outlined in the European Commission's 'Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change[2]', social services are key to helping modernise social protection systems and supporting the development of adequate social protection schemes in local communities throughout Europe.

ESN's Reference Group on the European Semester explores how social services issues concerning children, adults with disabilities or mental health problems and older people are addressed at national and European levels. It also develops specific recommendations to feed into the European Semester.

Methodology[3]

- **The questionnaires**

The ESN secretariat drafted 25 questionnaires, one per country represented in the Group. We asked the Group members to comment on selected social policy sections from the European Commission's country reports[4] pertaining to their country. ESN wanted to know whether the members agreed with the analysis made by the Commission and to highlight any existing analytical gaps in the Commission's document, especially regarding the challenges faced by public social services at the local level.

The questions within the questionnaires varied depending on the key issues highlighted by the Commission's country reports.

Questions also aimed at following up on specific issues that emerged from ESN's 2015 European Semester report[5]. They were structured around the following key themes:

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[1] For a complete list of members of the Reference Group, please see 'Acknowledgements' on page 4.

[2] Jean-Claude Juncker (15 July 2014) 'A New Start for Europe: My Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change'. Political Guidelines for the next European Commission. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/priorities/docs/pg_en.pdf (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[3] ESN members can access all background resources, such as our Guidelines on the European Semester Reference Group, in the members' area: http://www.esn-eu.org/members-events/89/index.html

[4] The country reports represent the European Commission's annual analysis of the economic and social challenges in the EU Member States. These reports are published in February each year and point early on to the challenges that each Member State should address. The country reports can be downloaded at: http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/making-it-happen/country-specific-recommendations/index_en.htm (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[5] European Social Network (2015) Looking ahead: Local public social services priorities for the European Semester 2016. Available at: http://www.esn-eu.org/news/727/index.html

1. Social protection, social inclusion and governance
2. Unemployment and integration of social and employment services
3. The role of EU funding
4. Young people: early school leaving and youth (un)employment
5. Children's services and childcare: poverty and social inclusion, community care
6. Older people: long-term care and service provision
7. People with disabilities and people with mental health problems: employment; development of community care services
8. Other vulnerable groups: migrants, Roma and other minorities, homeless people.

- **The annual meeting**

Having completed the questionnaire, Group members gathered on 9 September 2016 with officials from the European Commission and experts from the European Social Observatory, to discuss and compare their contributions[6]. They drew up recommendations on the best ways to involve local authorities and public social services in the European Semester process, notably in the context of the future European Pillar of Social Rights (see below).

- **The report**

Information contained in this report about each country has been gathered through (a) the analysis of the questionnaires filled in by the members, (b) the country profiles drafted by ESN and (c) the debate held on 9 September 2016.

The cross-country comparison allowed us to identify the key challenges confronting public local social services in each country as well as developments that are currently taking place compared to those recent years. Perhaps most importantly it identified examples of concrete initiatives undertaken by local public social services or regional/national governments which were highlighted by the members.

Section three assesses ESN members' views on the adequacy and completeness of the CSRs for 2016-2017 addressed to their countries.

Finally, 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. One-page country profiles are available in section four of the report.

1.1. The European Semester since 2011

Introduced in 2011, the European Semester is a yearly cycle of economic policy coordination between Member States aimed at achieving the Europe 2020 targets[7]. The European Semester relies on three pillars:

1. The Europe 2020 Strategy, which is the EU's growth strategy containing five objectives to be reached by 2020, three of which relate to social inclusion. These are: reaching a 75% employment rate, reducing early-school leaving below 10%, and reducing the number of people in or at risk of poverty and social exclusion by 20 million by 2020.
2. The reformed Stability and Growth Pact, which aims at the coordination of fiscal policies.
3. The Macroeconomic Imbalances Procedure[8], which aims at the coordination of macro-economic policy.

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6 See also ESN's news article 'Involving local authorities and social services in EU policy-making'. Available at: http://www.esn-eu.org/news/839/index.html

7 See European Commission (2014) The EU's economic governance explained – fact sheet. Available at: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-14-2180_en.htm (last accessed 20 October 2016)

8 The Macroeconomic Imbalances Procedure (MIP) aims to identify, prevent and correct economic imbalances (such as excessive deficits) in the European Union. See more at: http://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/economic_governance/macroeconomic_imbalance_procedure/index_en.htm (last accessed 20 October 2016)

The first four cycles: 2011-2014

The European Semester starts in November each year, when the European Commission publishes the **Annual Growth Survey** (AGS) and the **Alert Mechanism Report** (AMR)**.** The AMR identifies, at an early stage, countries experiencing macro-economic imbalances and thus needing an **in-depth review** (IDR). In the AGS, the European Commission pinpoints the main economic challenges facing the EU and recommends priority measures for the coming year. Priorities identified in the AGS remained somewhat stable over the period 2012-2014. They concerned:

1. Pursuing differentiated growth-friendly fiscal consolidation
2. Restoring normal lending to the economy
3. Promoting growth and competitiveness for today and tomorrow
4. Tackling unemployment and the social consequences of the crisis
5. Modernising public administration

Member States should include the priorities and measures set out in the AGS when submitting their **Stability or Convergence Programmes** (SCP) on budgetary policies, and their **National Reform Programmes** (NRPs) on structural reforms, including those in the field of social policies. These two documents are submitted simultaneously by Member States at the end of April (mid-April in the case of Member States in the Eurozone), to ensure complementarity between fiscal and other structural policies. NRPs are at the heart of the thematic coordination under the Europe 2020 strategy, insofar as they represent the national implementation of European guidelines and policies.

Each year in May, the European Commission assesses both the SCPs and the NRPs and proposes **Country-specific Recommendations (CSRs)** to each Member State. In June, CSRs are discussed (and in some cases revised) in the respective advisory Committees[9], and ultimately voted on by the Council[10]. Finally, in July, the European Council[11] endorses the CSRs, thus formally closing the European Semester cycle. Then, the implementation phase starts in Member States.

[9] The Economic and Financial Committee (EFC), the Economic Policy Committees (EPC), the Employment Committee (EMCO) and the Social Protection Committee (SPC).

[10] The Council of Ministers or 'Council' is made up of relevant government ministers from all EU countries, depending on the subject discussed.

[11] The European Council is made up of the heads of state or government of the 28 EU Member States, the European Council President and the President of the European Commission.

The European Semester in 2015 and 2016

In 2015, several substantive and procedural changes were introduced for the first European Semester process under the Juncker Commission[12].

Integrated approach

On the content side, the 5 priorities of the AGS were replaced by 3 pillars, reflecting the priorities of the new Commission[13]:

- A coordinated boost to investment
- A renewed commitment to structural reforms
- Pursuing fiscal responsibility.

Seven priority policy areas were identified:

1. Improving the dynamics in labour markets and tackling the high level of unemployment
2. Pension reforms
3. Modernising social protection systems
4. Improving the flexibility of product and services markets
5. Improving framework conditions for business investment
6. Improving the quality of research and innovation (R&I) investment
7. Improving efficiency in public administration.

Increasing transparency and ownership

Changes were introduced in the European Semester procedure to streamline and reinforce it, in particular by enhancing stakeholders' ownership of the process[14].

First, the Commission's analysis of each Member State's economic situation, challenges and implementation of key policies, also called the **country report**, is now published two months before the CSRs. Both documents were previously published simultaneously[15], which left no time for Member States to discuss or explain their choices. To make the best of the new timeline, the two months before and after the publication of the country reports are devoted to bilateral meetings with the Member States. These may take the form of 'fact-finding missions' on the ground undertaken by Commission officials and the European Semester Officers[16] in the Commission's permanent representations in Member States. These typically involve civil servants as well as national social partners and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). It has been reported that together with intensified bilateral dialogue with Member States, these fact-finding missions arguably led to an increased quality and accuracy of the analysis in the Commission's country reports[17].

Second, the Commission has requested that Member States follow a 'tell only once' approach. Information already available should be shared and re-used and EU level activities should focus on

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[12] Jean-Claude Juncker was elected president of the European Commission for 2014-2019.

[13] Jean-Claude Juncker (15 July 2014) 'A New Start for Europe: My Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change'. Political Guidelines for the next European Commission. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/priorities/docs/pg_en.pdf (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[14] Proposals put forward by the Commission are organised around four axes: 'Simplifying Commission outputs and allowing for more feedback on Commission analysis'; 'Streamlining reporting requirements of Member States'; 'Enhancing the multilateral nature of the process'; 'Opening up the process and increasing engagement with other actors'. As for the latter point, the Commission has put forward some proposals for improving the dialogue with the European Parliament and social partners at EU level.

[15] Until 2014, CSRs were accompanied by Staff Working Documents (one for each country). They explained the rationale behind each recommendation.

[16] European Semester Officers are policy experts working in the European Commission's representations in each of the 28 EU capital cities. To find a European Semester Officer in your country, you may consult the websites of the European Commission Representations at: http://ec.europa.eu/represent_en.htm (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[17] See Zeitlin, J., Vanhercke, B. with Zwinkels A. (2015) 'Further Socializing the European Semester: Moving Forward for a "Social Triple A?"', Report prepared for the Luxembourg Presidency of the Council of the European Union, Brussels, European Social Observatory

the analysis and updating of this information. Member States should **'refocus' their National Reform Programmes** by providing more targeted national input at an early stage, and **involve national parliaments and social partners in the formulation of these documents**. The Commission has decided to give Member States **fewer ('streamlined') but more targeted CSRs**, aiming to focus the CSRs on what matters most, and on their effective monitoring and implementation.

The European Pillar of Social Rights

On 9 September 2015, President Juncker in his State of the Union address in the European Parliament[18] announced the establishment of a European Pillar of Social Rights (hereafter 'the Pillar'). This initiative is part of the work undertaken by the Commission for a deeper and fairer Economic and Monetary Union (EMU)[19] and the commitment of the current European Commission to create a Europe worthy of a 'Social Triple A' rating[20]. The ambition of the Pillar is to represent "[…] a reference framework to screen the employment and social performance of participating Member States, to drive reforms at national level and, more specifically, to serve as a compass for renewed convergence within the euro area"[21].

The first preliminary outline of the European Pillar of Social Rights sets out the key social objectives and values inscribed in the EU primary law[22]. Nonetheless, it is not intended to be enshrined in law, ie form part of the European Treaties. Instead of amending the European social *acquis* or replacing existing rights, the Pillar should build on and complement the legal *status quo*, ensuring that common rules remain up-to-date. In the Commission's words, the purpose of the Pillar is to 'operationalise' existing social rights[23]. It will serve as a framework to revisit the EU's employment and social performance in the context of changing work patterns and societies, and guide policies in several fields essential for well-functioning and fair labour markets and welfare systems in participating Member States[24].

Therefore, by establishing the Pillar, the Commission will pursue two complementary work strands[25]:

- Modernising and addressing the gaps in existing social policy legislation to take account of today's work environment and to ensure that new models of work maintain a fair balance in the relationship between employers and workers
- Identifying social benchmarks with a view to upward convergence about the functioning of the labour market, skills and social protection.

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[18] Jean-Claude Juncker, State of the Union 2015. See more at: https://ec.europa.eu/priorities/state-union-2015_en (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[19] European Commission (2015) Commission Work Programme 2016 'No time for business as usual'. Strasbourg, 27 October 2015, COM(2015) 610 final.

[20] In his October 2014 speech to the European Parliament, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker declared his ambition for the EU to achieve what he called a 'social triple A' rating, in parallel to being 'triple A' in the financial sense. See also the Five Presidents' report, available at: http://ec.europa.eu/priorities/sites/beta-political/files/5-presidents-report_en.pdf (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[21] European Commission (2016) Communication 'Launching a consultation on a European Pillar of Social Rights'. Strasbourg, 8 March 2016, COM(2016) 127 final.

[22] European Commission, Communication 'Launching a consultation on a European Pillar of Social Rights'. Strasbourg, 8 March 2016, COM(2016) 127 final.

[23] European Commission (2016) Towards a European Pillar of Social Rights – Questions and Answers. Factsheet, Strasbourg, 8 March 2016. Available at: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-16-545_en.htm (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[24] The Pillar is conceived to be established within the euro area, but would also be open for other Member States to join on a voluntary basis.

[25] Commission Work Programme 2016, op. cit.

2. Cross-country comparison of key themes

In the analysis below, 'members' refer to ESN's Reference Group members. Countries are named according to their country code. For a complete list of participating organisations and abbreviations, see the 'Acknowledgements' section at the beginning of this report. Please note that the lists of countries named in examples may not be exhaustive. For a full description of each individual country, see the country profiles in section four.

2.1. The impact of fiscal consolidation on public social policies and budgets: a continued challenge but some light in the darkness

ESN's 2015 European Semester report highlighted the implementation of fiscal consolidation measures in most Member States in the aftermath of the **financial and economic crisis**. In many cases, budget cuts entailed a **reduction of local government budgets** and impacted on social policies' funding, design and implementation. Concerns were raised about the impact of these measures on the effectiveness of national social protection systems and the quality of social services provision.

This trend has continued in 2016, with several countries witnessing **further cuts to social policy budgets** or **difficulties in restoring an adequate level of social spending** (AT, BG, DK, HR, CY, DK, EL, IE, LT, and ES).

In Spain, budget cuts implemented since 2011 have severely affected the 'Concerted Plan' (the instrument agreed between the national government and the municipalities to finance community social services at local level), thus seriously threatening the quality and universality of social services. The reduction in financial transfers towards municipalities has entailed the elimination or the reshaping of several social programmes both in Croatia and Cyprus.

In Croatia, due to a lack of funding from the national level, local authorities have had to reduce the scope of services and benefits they offer, especially maternity benefits, free textbooks for primary and secondary schools and the support to organisations caring for vulnerable groups (eg: persons with disabilities). Similarly, in Cyprus, financial cuts have obliged municipalities to reduce or end social programmes not considered as "essential". According to the Cypriot member, after the first wave of cuts, the number of services offered has remained stable since 2013 and no new initiatives have been planned.

In Greece, the quality of social services offered by municipalities has been severely affected by the reduction of staff and the ban on hiring new civil servants deriving from austerity measures. The Danish, Irish and Lithuanian members point to possible risks for the most vulnerable groups because of cuts to social benefits or inadequate benefit indexation (LT). Denmark has recently introduced a 'social benefits cap' and an 'integration benefit', two provisions which may entail a decrease in social benefits and a reduction of household budgets.

These initiatives in Denmark – introduced in 2016 to be fully implemented in 2017 – may lead to an increase in local social services expenses to address the needs of the most affected groups (eg: to help pay rent and bills, ensuring access to healthcare and dental care). Since Danish municipalities cannot raise taxes without government approval, the risk is that these extra-costs will be financed by cutting other municipal services. Indeed, following the financial agreement with the government, Danish municipalities will cut their budgets by 1% each year in 2016 and 2017, a circumstance which will impact on social services' capacity to promote new initiatives.

The situation appears more nuanced in other countries. In Belgium, for instance, the value of some benefits (such as the minimum income support) increased in 2016, though eligibility conditions, labour

market activation requirements and targeting have been tightened. According to some NGOs, this situation may lead to a worsening of the situation of the most vulnerable groups.

In the UK, Social Work Scotland pointed to the shortcomings of the introduction of the 'Universal credit' by the UK Government, partly responsible for an increased reliance on food banks and temporary accommodation and for an increase of poverty. At the same time, the introduction by the UK Government of a national living wage (from April 2016), coupled with the investment in additional free childcare announced by the Scottish Government are expected to improve the situation.

Some ESN members (PL, SI, and PT) have expressed **a more optimistic view**. For example, the Slovenian contributor explained that "from 1 January 2016 some of the austerity measures have ceased". Several benefits such as the 'Financial Social Assistance', the 'Supplementary Allowance', child supplements and subsidised lunches have been increased or eligibility conditions have been relaxed. Similarly, in Poland, the value of certain benefits has increased or eligibility criteria have been relaxed. This has been the case for some family benefits. Furthermore, new benefits have been introduced for families with two or more children.

The Portuguese member of the Group underlined the wish of the new government to prioritise the basic provision of social services based on "broad partnerships", consisting of coordinated efforts between various institutional levels and actors. Several measures targeting the most vulnerable groups have recently been introduced, including a reform of the 'Social Insertion Income' and the 'Solidarity Supplement for Older People' increasing their coverage and generosity. Measures also include the introduction of an 'Additional Supplement for Salaries' targeting the working poor and 'child allowance' is being reviewed with the aim of increasing its coverage and generosity.

2.2. Social policy coordination at national, regional and local levels: an ongoing debate

The 2015 European Semester report identified an **unclear division of competences** between different levels of government, limiting the effectiveness and quality of service provision. This was the case in BE, FR, IT, LT, PL, SI, PT, RO, and ES. **Administrative reforms** have either been implemented or are ongoing, and the assessment of these reforms varies significantly. In most of the countries listed above **the reform process is still ongoing** and its results have been assessed as 'mixed' (BE, FI, IT, PT, RO) or rather negative (ES, FR). On the contrary, a more positive view was expressed by the Lithuanian contributor. Issues linked to the (horizontal and vertical) distribution of competences in the area of social provision were also raised in the cases of Croatia, Cyprus, Hungary and Ireland.

With the sixth state reform in Belgium[26], several social competences have recently been shifted to the regions. Currently, for many competences (eg: child benefits or the social economy), Belgium is in a transition period, with the old legislation still in force and regions struggling to apply the new provisions.

In Finland, the government recently published a series of draft bills linked to the reform of health and social services and the transfer of responsibilities from the municipalities to the newly created counties and regions. According to the Finnish contributors, the effectiveness of the reform may be negatively affected by the lack of clarity in terms of responsibilities between the regional and local level and the potential lack of coordination.

On the other hand, the excessive centralisation of competences for welfare provision was criticised by both the Cypriot and Irish members, since this could entail a weakening of the relationship between

[26] The sixth state reform, entitled 'A more efficient federal state and more autonomous entities', was adopted at the end of 2013 and devolved additional responsibilities to the Belgian regions (economy, employment) and communities (family policy) as of mid-2014.

local offices and welfare recipients. On the contrary, while not ignoring such a risk, ESN's Hungarian contributor highlighted the potential positive consequences from the recent decision to move some competences from the municipalities to the counties, which may lead to more neutral means-testing procedures.

The French Association of Directors of Social Services also assessed negatively the implementation of the territorial reform in France claiming that it failed in many respects to achieve the objectives of rationalisation and efficiency. The distribution of competences between local authorities and the central government still appears confusing and, therefore, social services in various policy fields are often duplicated.

The lack of coordination between different government levels was also identified as a potential barrier for the implementation of the Support to Active Inclusion (SIA) in Italy, a pilot minimum income scheme which is now being extended to the whole country. As noted by the Italian member, the implementation of active labour market measures linked to the scheme (in theory, a regional competence) has been entrusted to the municipalities and the Lazio region highlighted that this may lead to coordination difficulties.

In other cases, the debate revolves around the coordination between public services and NGOs. For instance, in Portugal, the Association of Social Services Professionals pointed out the risks of transferring major responsibilities to NGOs without adequately regulating the process, which could lead to unfair service access and quality for citizens across the country. Similar problems were identified in Cyprus, Spain and Austria.

In 2015, some ESN members stressed the **existence of remarkable territorial disparities in social services provision and quality**. This year this issue has been raised with particular strength by the Czech, Italian, Romanian, Austrian and Croatian members. In Italy, differences in service provision stem from either the diverse amount of resources available or the different degrees of efficiency in planning, organising and delivering services across the regions. The Lazio Region is trying to improve service planning and delivery by strengthening participatory planning, social impact evaluation and promoting better integration between social and healthcare policies.

In Romania, the uneven distribution of social services across the country is being addressed through 'integrated community teams' aimed at offering integrated interventions to disadvantaged communities. This plan is however at an initial stage. Its success will, crucially, depend on the availability of funds at the local level and on the presence of adequately trained staff. Similar problems may also limit the effectiveness of the 'Unified economic centre' in Croatia, whose introduction has been postponed to March 2017. Set up within the State Administration Office, its aim is to centralise the management of the new Guaranteed Minimum Benefit, ensure better targeting, reduce administrative errors and free up time for social workers. In Austria, there are nine 'Bundesländer' and as many ways to plan, finance and deliver services.

The Lithuanian contributor made a **positive assessment** of the recent reform of the Social Assistance law. In their opinion, the changes to the legislation introduced after an exchange of good practice between municipalities have meant more targeting and flexibility in the social assistance system, better incentives to enter the regular labour market, and improved collaboration between government departments.

2.3. Sharing responsibilities for social services financing: an ongoing challenge

In 2015, the **responsibilities for funding** social services gave rise to concern in several countries. These concerns have **only been partially addressed by recent reforms** according to the Group members. In the Czech Republic, the 2014 amendment to the Act on Social Services modified social

service funding by granting more responsibilities to the regions. However, the reform missed the opportunity to reduce regional disparities, which could have been done by improving transparency and introducing common criteria in all the counties. In Germany, regional disparities in municipalities' financial resources have had implications for social services, with the richest municipalities able to spend about 20 times more on public infrastructure than the poorest ones. Therefore, municipalities have been calling for a more just distribution of resources and costs across the country.

Shortcomings concerning **the state financial allocations to the municipalities** have been flagged also in Austria, the Netherlands, Latvia, Romania, and Slovenia. In Slovenia, local authorities continue to experience difficulties in securing financing or co-financing of social programmes because of the unclear distribution of competences between levels of government. Confronted with a reduction of state transfers and limited local resources, some municipalities have been obliged to cut a number of services. Similarly, Dutch municipalities are facing uncertainty related to financial aspects of the ongoing decentralisation process and with a consistent reduction of state transfers.

In Austria, the devolution of responsibilities to lower administrative levels has not been accompanied by a transfer of funding for local social services to be able to maintain their offer of services. Consequently, service users' contributions were raised from EUR 640 million to EUR 680 million. In addition, the number of indebted municipalities has risen in the last years. In Latvia, funding for social provisions is decentralised, so the level of social services and benefits varies across the country. In an attempt to reduce disparities between municipalities, a 'Municipal Finance Equalisation Mechanism' was created.

2.4. Homelessness and housing exclusion on the rise

Difficulties in accessing housing and the increase in homelessness were highlighted in 2015 as an increasingly serious problem in several countries (FR, IE, SE, UK, and SI). Problems related to housing are not limited to the most vulnerable groups insofar as they increasingly concern people from the **middle classes**, due to **high prices** and a **shortage** of housing in some countries. In 2016, **this issue has been raised by a greater number of countries**, where local social services are experiencing remarkable difficulties in meeting this challenge. These include: Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and the UK (Scotland).

In France, the high level of house prices in metropolitan areas is a source of inequality as well as an obstacle for competitiveness. According to the French Association of Directors of Social Services, the supply-side policy initiated by the government should be reinforced.

Already in 2015, the Swedish Association of Directors of Social Welfare Services reported that addressing the housing shortage was a challenge for Swedish social services. On the one hand, they are required by law to provide housing for those in need; on the other hand, social services are not formal actors in the housing market. Consequently, the Swedish contributor recommended that the government implements a more active housing policy in close cooperation with local authorities and housing companies. However, "very little" has been done in this policy area over the last year.

In Belgium, there is a serious shortage of accommodation in the private market, an acute lack of social housing and a sharp increase in energy prices, all of which place a burden on social services to find adequate solutions for people in need. The situation may worsen due to the refugee crisis. The Croatian member noted that an increasing number of people have problems with housing and are seeking help from social services to pay rents and bills. In the Netherlands, access to the housing market is particularly difficult for young people and low-income families, and a better system of social housing is needed. In Spain, a high number of families have house-related debts and the number of evictions is increasing. As noted by the Romanian member, the country does not have a national plan on housing. The actions undertaken until now by the government appear disconnected and have had low coverage.

Several ESN members, besides highlighting the severity of housing problems, have also signalled **some initiatives planned or implemented** to meet the challenge (DE, DK, IE, and SI). The Danish contributor highlighted the implementation in several municipalities of projects based on the 'Housing First' approach. The Irish member noted that the Residential Tenancies Act amendment was passed in 2015 to restrict landlords' rights to increase rents. Furthermore, an agreement was reached on permitted levels of 'Housing Assistance Payment' (a rent subsidy). However, the effectiveness of these measures remains to be assessed.

In Slovenia, housing evictions are on the rise and the government has commissioned a thorough study on social housing which should form the basis for new legislation. In Germany, the already severe shortage of social housing in several cities has been exacerbated by the inflow of asylum seekers. In Cologne, building standards are now slowly being reformed, but building enough social housing to enable refugees to leave mass accommodation as quickly as possible is still a major challenge.

2.5. Comprehensive and integrated social inclusion strategies: only small steps taken

Already in 2015, several ESN members stressed the **lack of comprehensive social inclusion strategies** in their countries as well as **delays and shortcomings** in drafting and implementing national **social inclusion agendas**. The 2008 Commission Recommendation on active inclusion[27] urged Member States to develop comprehensive and integrated strategies based on adequate income support, inclusive labour markets and access to quality services. However, in most cases, government **actions appear excessively imbalanced, giving priority to labour market activation**, a strategy which may limit the inclusion of the most vulnerable.

Three contributors expressed a particularly negative assessment about the capacity of national government to develop comprehensive and integrated social inclusion strategies. The Greek member points to the fragmented, underfunded and restrictive character of the initiatives undertaken, which are in any case insufficient to counterbalance the social impact of austerity policies. In Hungary, the adequacy of both income support and activation policies was questioned. While the level of supplementary benefit appears extremely low, active labour market policies are still limited to public work schemes, whose efficiency has not been determined yet, and with an excessive reliance on sanctions. In Croatia, analysis of poverty is hampered by the lack of a uniform and commonly accepted definition. Therefore, only income-related aspects of poverty are considered, thus underestimating the multiple dimensions of the phenomenon.

A few positive steps can be seen in countries such as Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Germany, Portugal, Romania, and Scotland in the UK. In Belgium, the Third Federal Plan against Poverty has been finally enacted after a negotiation process that lasted two years. In Germany, in 2014 the Government of North Rhine-Westphalia developed (in collaboration with citizens and civil society organisations) an action plan against poverty and social exclusion focusing on the social environment and solidarity in local communities. In Portugal, the government has announced the launch of a strategy against poverty at the local level, with an emphasis on areas characterised by high rates of child poverty. However, a national strategy for the eradication of poverty is still lacking. In Scotland, the Child Poverty Bill was recently announced by the Scottish Government.

In Bulgaria, the implementation of the notion of 'shared services' may represent an important step towards the provision of integrated services for the most vulnerable. A pilot programme targeted at children with disabilities from ethnic minorities has been launched funded by the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) and a loan from the World Bank. Some reforms passed by the Danish government aimed at enhancing work incentives have been positively assessed by the Danish

[27] European Commission (2008) Recommendation of 3 October 2008 on the active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market. Available at: http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2008:307:0011:0014:EN:PDF

contributor. However, their effectiveness in including groups at the margins of the labour market such as immigrants and people with disabilities is yet to be established. Likewise, in Ireland, the effectiveness of employment-centred strategies may be limited by the fact that poverty often concerns people furthest from the labour market such as pensioners, students, care-givers, people with an illness or a disability. In Lithuania, the provision of integrated services is advancing at a slow pace and recommendations for inter-institutional collaboration elaborated by the government appear ineffective.

2.6. Better employment and social services coordination: key for supporting the most disadvantaged

As several ESN members highlight, an excessive emphasis on labour market integration may limit the social inclusion of the most vulnerable groups in society who may need specific support before and after entering the labour market. To address this challenge, there is a need to provide tailored support through better **coordination between employment and social services**.

Positive developments regarding the provision of individualised services and the coordination between employment and social services were highlighted by several contributors (HR, EL, FI, PL, and SE). In Croatia, the Social Welfare Act requires close cooperation between the centres for social welfare and the employment offices in the implementation of measures targeted at working age minimum income recipients. In Greece, the effectiveness of programmes targeted at the unemployed could be further reinforced by the creation of 'single entry points' providing integrated services including medical care, psychological support and professional counselling.

> *Unemployment in Europe is still too high despite the creation of 8 million new jobs since 2013 and a constant rise in employment. However, there is still social injustice. For this reason, we must work quickly on the fundamental European Pillar of Social Rights.*
>
> *Jean-Claude Juncker, State of the Union 2016*

In Finland, 'Ohjaamo', a new integrated service model for young people aged under 30, has been implemented in 31 municipalities and the first results from an ongoing evaluation seem promising. In Poland, some changes to the 'Activation and Integration Programme' aiming at enhancing its effectiveness are underway. In Sweden, the respective responsibilities of social and employment services are established through local agreements defining how the two agencies should interact to support the unemployed and how activities are organised and financed.

While the examples above show some positive developments, there are also several examples of weak coordination between employment and social services, as highlighted by contributors in CZ, BG, LV, RO, SI and ES. In the Czech Republic, this link should be ensured by the Agency for Social Inclusion operating in 37 areas characterised by a high number of people at risk of social exclusion, especially Roma. The Agency establishes partnerships with local stakeholders but its effectiveness is often constrained by a lack of adequate financial and staff resources or social services on the ground. The Bulgarian contributor points to a lack of coordination between employment and social services, which are often located at different places within towns. The former cannot provide information about eligibility for social benefits while the latter are not always informed on available programmes for the unemployed. Some promising developments may come from a pilot project that aims to set up a new model for integrated services.

According to the Latvian contributor, state employment agencies are unable to identify the specific needs of the various recipients and do not provide tailored support. In Romania, a definition of unified working procedures and clear objectives in providing services is needed to enhance cooperation between employment and social services, whose respective responsibilities should be clearly identified. In Slovenia, information exchange between social and employment services is limited to the

case of those furthest from the labour market, for example people with addictions and severe mental health problems. The Spanish contributors highlighted that coordination between employment and social services should be strengthened, following a one-stop shop model.

2.7. Children's services: still unaffordable and under-provided

The situation in the Member States varies greatly when it comes to the availability of childcare services and the provision of services for the most disadvantaged children, including the development of foster care and community care services. Already in 2015, the importance of **childcare** in promoting **children's development, preventing** the inheritance of **social disadvantage,** and **facilitating parents' access to the labour market** was widely acknowledged by ESN members.

This year, the Polish member highlighted the 'Toddler' programme promoted by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, which provides financial support to local governments with a view to developing childcare facilities (including nurseries and children's clubs) for children aged under three. In Ireland, a second year of free preschool began this year. In Estonia, the City of Tartu has created almost 600 additional places for children under three, both in public and private childcare facilities. However, the cost of childcare remains high for working parents and the availability of childcare facilities is still low. In Latvia, as of June 2016, state funding for private childcare facilities has been cut and now municipalities can either decide to finance these by themselves or not to finance them at all.

In Romania, the government recently approved a law aimed at encouraging preschool attendance of children from disadvantaged families. According to the Romanian contributor, the availability of early childhood education and care (ECEC) has continued to grow. However, the costs for children's enrolment are still higher than the amount of state support. The Scottish Government in the UK has committed to doubling the number of early learning and childcare hours offered free to parents, while some councils, such as Renfrewshire, are exploring further models of affordable and flexible childcare.

> *Childhood is a critical period for preparing future generations to be social, productive, healthy and happy. Early years are crucial in people's development and impact on adults' social, economic and labour outcomes.*
>
> *Lara Montero, A.; Investing in Children's Services, Improving Outcomes, European Social Network, Brighton, United Kingdom 2016.*

Less optimistic, the Belgian member pointed out the fact that as of 1 April 2015 the Flemish Government decided to increase the rates for childcare facilities from a standard minimum of EUR 1.5 to EUR 5. The standard minimum is the rate usually paid by minimum income beneficiaries who can as of now, have a discounted rate of EUR 3 only if they enrol in an activation programme. According to the Cypriot member, there is not enough investment in ECEC for children aged 0 to 4. Municipalities have no responsibility for ECEC, which in practice means that only some municipalities provide ECEC services, such as childminders or day nurseries. In the Czech Republic, the development of ECEC is limited by a fragmented distribution of competences for children's education Responsibilities for children aged between three and six belong to the Ministry of Education, while responsibilities for younger children are not clearly attributed.

Several initiatives targeted at **children from disadvantaged backgrounds** have been highlighted by members. In Germany, municipalities continue to implement the 2011 education and participation package, which fosters the educational participation of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. A variety of subsidies are available for children and teenagers from families with a low income or on jobseekers' allowance, as well as basic assistance for asylum seekers. Whilst the law supports children directly through vouchers, bureaucratic difficulties preventing many eligible families from applying for support were also highlighted.

In Bulgaria, European funds have been used to build infrastructure and train specialised staff for children with special needs. In the Czech Republic, kindergartens are free except for food costs. As this may prevent the poorest children from attending, in 2016 the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs launched a programme to finance lunch for children in need. In Sweden, the provisions on the integration of migrants and unaccompanied children into the educational system may be limited in practice by the lack of places in schools and the shortage of specialised staff.

2.8. Community care: improvement in children's services, less so for adults with disabilities and severe mental health problems

Several contributors addressed the **deinstitutionalisation of children's services and the development of foster care** (EE, HU, IT, LT, PL, PT, and RO). In some countries, there has been progress. For instance, the Polish contributor reported that the Act on family support and foster care has introduced systemic solutions based on prevention and intensive work with families to prevent the institutionalisation of children. The number of family assistants has increased and more emphasis has been put on deinstitutionalisation. In Lithuania, a pilot project to facilitate the transition of children from care institutions to community based social services has been launched. The first steps of the project are to reorganise existing services and broaden access to them. In the second and third stage, new infrastructure is to be built and new forms of services are to be provided. In Estonia, regional mental health centres for children were introduced, where several professionals such as psychiatrists, nurses and psychologists work together to provide integrated support.

On the other hand, in Portugal, while deinstitutionalisation of the child protection system has been on the political agenda for the last two decades, progress has been slow. Over 8,000 children are still in institutions and the systems of kinship and foster care needs improvement. According to the Romanian contributor, recent legislative changes aimed at shortening the time taken to declare a child up for adoption are not necessarily a guarantee of better protection of children's rights, nor do they represent an improvement of the deinstitutionalisation process. This process is closely linked to the capacity of social services to support poor families, which is often weak across the country. Shortcomings related to the development of foster care were also highlighted in Italy.

The **development of community-based support for older people and people with disabilities** is still being discussed in several Member States (BG, CZ). In Bulgaria, the implementation of the national strategy for long-term care is a topic of public debate. An assessment of existing social services and their adequacy in various parts of the country is ongoing, while the establishment of integrated social services will be challenging due to the responsibilities for service financing and organisation being held at different governance levels. In the Czech Republic, a bill aimed at specifying and regulating the provision and financing of health and social services in the healthcare sector is under preparation. According to the Czech ESN member, the bill certainly represents progress but its effectiveness may be limited by the fact that it mainly focuses on residential care.

Though a **common trend towards deinstitutionalisation** and the need to shift from residential care to home and community-based care were highlighted by most members, **remarkable difficulties remain for specific groups such as people with severe disabilities and mental health problems** (CZ, EE, IE, NL, SE). The Czech contributor expressed an optimistic view as "the process is going successfully, although it is financially demanding". The greatest challenges concern the redeployment of severely disabled people in community-based care, which is particularly costly, and the deinstitutionalisation of people affected by mental health problems, which is advancing slowly. To advance the deinstitutionalisation process, the Polish contributor underlined that various projects aimed at developing community based services for people with mental health problems and older people will be implemented throughout the country with European funds.

In Finland, the deinstitutionalisation process is progressing, albeit with regional disparities. In Ireland, deinstitutionalisation is taking place, but the process has been constrained by the lack of appropriate

accommodation for people with mental health problems, staff shortages in mental health services, and the limited range of community-based services offered. In Sweden, the reduction in the number of beds in psychiatric hospitals has put considerable pressure on community social services, and led to significant differences in service quality for people with mental health problems between the municipalities. On the other hand, the French contributor questioned the relevance of a complete deinstitutionalisation, pointing out the current shortage of places in institutions, especially for people with mental health problems - an increasingly serious problem in France.

When it comes to people with disabilities, a recent bill in France places a duty on county councils to offer an appropriate support package for every person with disabilities from December 2017. As highlighted by the German contributor, following recent criticism by the United Nations' Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), a new law, Bundesteilhabegesetz (Federal Participation Act) - still under consultation - is intended to foster the participation and self-determination of people with disabilities and bring policies in line with the CRPD.

In January 2016, the Romanian Government proposed a national programme to protect and promote the rights of people with disabilities, focusing on deinstitutionalisation. Though it seems to be a step in the right direction, there is a lack of financial resources and it has not been developed in consultation with social services. In Latvia, following the publication of the Social services development guidelines 2014-2010, the responsibilities and roles of the various stakeholders in the process of deinstitutionalisation and development of community care have been better defined. However, issues related to the attribution of financial resources to the municipalities are not clear enough yet.

2.9. EU funds: an essential tool for funding social services programmes

As in 2015, several ESN members have highlighted the role of the **European Structural and Investment Funds,** especially the European Social Fund (ESF), as well as the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) and the European Integration Fund. These funds are key in some countries to ensure the financing of essential social policy programmes.

Besides active labour market policies (ALMPs), examples of EU-funded initiatives include support for poor and vulnerable people (BE, DE, CY, PT); integrated social services (BG, EL, LT, PL, SE); training for social services' staff (BG, LV); deinstitutionalisation (BG, HU, PL); integration of immigrants and asylum seekers (CY, DE, SE); initiatives targeted at young people (LT, NL, SE); and caring for the homeless (PL).

The **importance of EU funds** in financing these policies was stressed in particular by the representatives from Belgium, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Greece, Poland, Spain and the UK (Scotland). Besides expressing their satisfaction with the Funds, most ESN members from these countries have also provided some recommendations for improving access and usage. For instance, the Belgian member recommended that the EU ensures that the 20% of the ESF allocated to the fight against poverty and social exclusion – the so-called 'minimum share' - effectively goes to such projects. Both the Bulgarian and the Czech members highlighted the fact that their countries have made remarkable progress towards a broader and better use of the Funds.

> *The European Structural and Investment Funds are closely linked to the objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy and to (…) the country-specific recommendations. (…) It is important to make sure that EU funds are put to the most effective use in terms of addressing the economic and social challenges in Member States.*
>
> *European Commission (2016) Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Central Bank and the Eurogroup.*

The Spanish members recommended that any possible penalties in accessing the Funds deriving from the excessive deficit procedure should not affect resources devoted to the fight against poverty and social exclusion. The Greek member expressed appreciation for the FEAD, and recommends improving the programme by allowing the use of vouchers. Finally, the Scottish contributor appeared particularly worried by the possible consequences that UK's departure from the EU will have on accessing these funds and the impact of their withdrawal on vulnerable groups.

While generally positive about the role played by EU Funds in developing services, several members also pointed out some **shortcomings concerning their use at national level** (BG, CY, FR, HR, LT LV, NL, and PT). For instance, the Croatian contributor highlighted problems related to the insufficient administrative capacity in municipalities and counties, a problem aggravated by the fact that administrative procedures for accessing the Funds are overly complex. Along the same line, the Danish contributor explained that few municipalities applied for EU resources mainly because of excessively slow and bureaucratic procedures and difficulties in managing them. The complexity of administrative procedures linked to the Funds and their overly bureaucratic character was also stressed by the Latvian and Dutch contributors.

Another issue raised by some members, for instance in Cyprus and Latvia, was the need to increase the role of the municipalities in accessing and managing EU Funds, while the French contributor questioned whether EU resources were too often used to finance active labour market projects without assessing whether they were effective. Finally, the contributors from Bulgaria, Lithuania and Portugal raised questions on the sustainability of EU-funded programmes beyond the financing period.

2.10. Programmes for migrants and refugees: assessing current initiatives and ways forward

The social integration of migrants has often been **a challenge for social inclusion policies** in the Member States. The recent **refugee crisis** and increased number of migrants has put **considerable pressure on local public social services**. There have been mixed responses in Member States.

Several **positive initiatives were highlighted** (AT, BE, CY, ES, DE, IT). In 2016, the Brussels Capital Region planned to open two new reception offices for newcomers with a total capacity of 4,000 persons per year. The first one opened in March 2016. In Cyprus, municipalities have implemented several projects funded through the European Integration Fund. These programmes, designed by local authorities, aim at achieving effective integration by helping immigrants to learn the national language, adapt to Cypriot society, access employment, education and training, thereby preventing discrimination. The ESN correspondent positively concluded that "by pursuing social integration policies at the local level, a smooth and easy social inclusion process was achieved".

In Spain, a pact between the autonomous communities was signed in March 2016 to support Syrian refugees. The region of Catalonia created a 'Committee for the Reception of Refugees' to enhance interdepartmental and administrative coordination in the reception of asylum seekers. The arrival of

over half a million asylum-seekers and many more refugees in 2015 posed new challenges to municipalities across Germany. The City of Cologne has worked with job centres, private companies and non-profit organisations to facilitate the integration of refugees into the labour market. 'CHANCE+ Network Refugees and Work' is one such programme, funded through the European Social Fund, and which supports labour market integration of refugees through personalised career advice, in-work training measures and qualifications. In Italy, where 115,000 migrants entered just in 2015, four 'hotspots' were created, around 6,000 emergency centres were set up, as well as the SPRAR – the Protection System for Asylum-seekers and Refugees, which provided integrated support to almost 22,000 people in 2015.

Despite positive initiatives undertaken throughout Europe, the Group members also expressed **'mixed' views with regards to the effectiveness of such measures in supporting the integration of migrants** (DK, FI, SE, NL, HU). In Denmark, the government has taken additional measures to facilitate the integration of refugees in employment through internships and tailored training. Many municipalities have also strengthened the coordination between the various administrations involved in the reception of refugees and their collaboration with employers, NGOs and volunteers, but they also pointed to various shortcomings. First, the municipalities do not know the exact number of asylum seekers they might receive, which makes it hard to plan initiatives. Second, as in Denmark, the reform of the integration benefit will make it difficult for local public services to find affordable housing solutions for refugees and immigrants, which may lead them to concentrate in 'ghettos'.

> *When it comes to managing the refugee crisis, we have started to see solidarity. I am convinced much more solidarity is needed. But I also know that solidarity must be given voluntarily. It must come from the heart. It cannot be forced.*
>
> *Jean-Claude Juncker, State of the Union 2016*

In Sweden, the refugee crisis has put considerable pressure on local social services, which are implementing a series of initiatives, including the provision of accommodation and recruitment of staff. However, according to the Swedish contributor, there is a need for enhanced cooperation between social services and the Employment Agency, and between public authorities and NGOs.

The Dutch contributor underlined that the reception of refugees is the responsibility of the national government, which decided to distribute refugees among big reception centres in the countryside. They also highlighted the lengthy procedure before a refugee is granted asylum; only then do the municipalities become responsible for their integration in employment and in society. However, this is difficult because refugees remain cut off from the rest of society for a long time. Finally, the Hungarian contributor expressed serious concerns about the attitude of the national government towards refugees and the **lack of a specific reception policy for asylum seekers. However, they also praised** volunteer organisations and individuals, who have been doing their utmost to support the refugees who arrived in the country, despite national government hostility.

3. Adequacy of the 2016-2017 CSRs in addressing the main socio-economic challenges[28]

As in 2015, the Group members were asked to provide their opinion on the adequacy of the 2016-2017 CSRs in addressing the main socio-economic challenges from the social services perspective in their countries. The analysis of the country questionnaires shows that most members (12) agree (BG, CZ, IT, LV, and RO) or partially agree (BE, FI, HU, NL, PT, SI, and UK) with the content of the CSRs. A more limited number of members (five) expressed a rather negative assessment of the CSRs (DK, FR, IE, SE, and ES). The rest of the contributors (seven or eight) did not express their opinion.

While fully supportive of the Commission's recommendation for Italy on active labour market policies and the development of a national anti-poverty strategy[29], the Italian member underlined that its implementation will be difficult in the near future, since coordination between multiple actors and levels of government is required. While equally agreeing with the CSRs for Latvia, the Latvian contributor underlined that they should also emphasise the need to strengthen the services offered by employment agencies to help the long-term unemployed enter the labour market.

As for the second group - countries which partially agree with the contents of the CSRs - the Finnish member warned of the risks in implementing too many reforms at the same time with a better evaluation of each of these, including their possible unintended consequences, being needed. Furthermore, attention should be paid to the persistent risk of increasing inequalities and polarisation within the population. The Hungarian member said they understood the rather "technical" formulation of the CSRs and agreed with their content. However, they recommend that the Commission adopts a firmer tone and reminds Hungary of its obligations in regards to the rule of law and human rights.

The Portuguese contributor highlighted that the CSRs should pay more attention to reconciling the priority of deficit reduction with an adequate level of social spending. Furthermore, the need for a national strategy against poverty should be explicitly addressed by a CSR. In Slovenia, CSRs should focus more on the modernisation of public administration and on improving the efficiency of the Centres for Social Welfare. In the opinion of the Scottish contributor, the CSRs for the UK should better address the issue of poverty and its effects.

On the other hand, several members expressed a more critical assessment of the contents of the 2016-2017 CSRs. According to the Danish member, in addition to focusing on overall macroeconomic issues, the European Commission should put forward recommendations more closely connected to social challenges such as the social inclusion of people with mental health problems, disabled people and the youth. The French member seriously questioned recommendations focusing on the deflation of salaries and cuts in public spending as a recipe for restoring economic growth. Even without massively increasing public deficit, the priority should be to fight the rise in inequalities.

According to the Irish contributor, the language used in EU analysis seems to consider poverty and social exclusion as a moral failure, neglecting the broader circumstances that may lead, for instance, to unemployment (eg: more general macro-economic issues, the incidence of illness or disabilities). The Spanish contributors noted that, while the analysis in the Commission's country report is thorough, the CSRs do not sufficiently mention social policy, and are biased towards macroeconomic discipline, deficit reduction and social inclusion through employment. Finally, the Swedish member was quite straightforward saying: "the recommendations to Sweden are inadequate for improving the social situation in the country to the extent that is needed".

[28] See Annex in section 6.3 for a comparative table of 2015 and 2016 Country-specific Recommendations.
[29] "Implement the reform of active labour market policies, in particular by strengthening the effectiveness of employment services. Facilitate the take-up of work for second earners. Adopt and implement the national antipoverty strategy and review and rationalise social spending".

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. *Click on the country's name to access the country profile.*

Country	Rationale and recommendation
Austria	Social services expenditure is determined by the nine federal states. There are no common, nationally agreed requirements in terms of data collection, quality measurement or client/social worker ratios. To avoid major discrepancies between regions and ensure consistent levels of social services provision across the country, Austria's national government should work towards the harmonisation of data collection, performance measurement and quality control.
Belgium	The recent administrative reform has failed to clarify the modalities of cooperation in the field of social services and social care (eg: for childcare and the social economy) between the federal and regional levels, as well as between regions. Therefore, it is recommended that the Belgian Government develop joined up approaches between all government levels to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, especially those with a migration background.
Bulgaria	The lack of coordination between employment and social services has prevented some people from accessing services they were theoretically eligible for. Coupled with a low general minimum income (EUR 33 per month), this has directly impacted on the most vulnerable. Bulgaria should consider improving the effectiveness of social assistance schemes to reduce poverty. In particular, Bulgaria should improve the offer of in-kind benefits for families and their children and create incentives to increase school attendance, given that it is a key factor to break the cycle of disadvantage. Other measures could include increasing the minimum income and improving cooperation between employment and social services.
Croatia	Several reforms in the field of social services, notably within the Social Welfare Act, have been postponed. It is recommended that Croatia speeds up the implementation of the Act and improves the functioning of social services by reducing the administrative burden weighing on social workers, enhancing transparency and the exchange of information regarding the granting of benefits, especially between the national and the regional level.
Cyprus	Municipalities have no responsibility in early childhood education and care, which is not compulsory for children aged 0-4. Some municipalities do provide home-based and crèche services. However, this is difficult given existing strict legal requirements, which imply a cost that would be unbearable for most local authorities. In these conditions, Cyprus should draft a national early childcare plan, backed by appropriate resources. Such a plan would give local authorities responsibilities for managing and providing ECEC services for children aged 0-4.

Czech Republic	Difficulties in social services' financing and organisation have been exacerbated by the decentralisation process in the last two years. This has resulted in great variations between the 14 Czech counties in terms of quality, accessibility, affordability and provision of social services. The government should clarify responsibilities and competences of regions, municipalities and providers in the planning and implementation of affordable and accessible quality services.
Denmark	Workforce supply is certainly the biggest concern in an ageing Denmark. However, to fully address the objectives of the recent reforms going in this direction, attention should be given to the most vulnerable groups in society. Denmark should look beyond employability and provide adequate social support to vulnerable individuals and groups, specifically young people, people with disabilities, people with mental health problems and migrants.
Estonia	Estonia is slowly engaging in the path of deinstitutionalisation of children's services, a good example of which is the creation of children's mental health centres. To move forward with community-based care for children with disabilities, alternatives such as foster care should be developed and receive additional funding.
Finland	Finland is undergoing a major reform of its health and social care services. To ensure the successful implementation of this reform and especially, the new 'free choice model', careful monitoring will be needed, as was done by the National Institute for Health and Welfare (THL). In their impact assessment of the draft law, THL warns about the lack of clarity regarding the division of responsibilities between the various public authorities, the general governance structure, and the relationship between public authorities and service providers. It is therefore advisable that Finland carries out evidence-based research and practice, especially regarding current services' capacity and division of responsibilities between public authorities from different sectors to implement the health and social care reform.
France	Despite administrative reforms implemented over the past six years, significant overlaps between layers of public administration and social services continue to exist. They concern child protection services and those for children with disabilities, as well as employment and social services. The French Government is therefore advised to address and mitigate these overlaps between administrative levels with responsibilities for social services.
Germany	The United Nations' Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), in its report for Germany, pointed to the persistence of parallel structures in the labour market, as well as in the fields of housing and education. Such arrangements were deemed detrimental to the full inclusion and participation of people with disabilities in society. Germany should therefore take measures to comply with these recommendations on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
Greece	Greece is still experiencing major social and economic difficulties, which have been exacerbated by the country currently hosting some 50,000 refugees and migrants over 30 sites. The unemployment rate was 23.4% in June 2016 (it was 8.6% in the EU28). In such circumstances, Greece must continue to provide essential social benefits and support services. These should be excluded from the supervision of the European Stability Mechanism, and should not undergo cuts solely based on their repercussions on public debt.

Hungary	The recent decentralisation reform has seen several responsibilities for social services being passed on to the county level. Some services were discontinued in municipalities that could not match the previous state funding. Faced with an approach that has recently challenged the eligibility to and generosity of social benefits, Hungary should adjust its social policy and services and reconnect with the foundation and ethics of social work and social justice.
Ireland	Measures have focused on getting people (back) into employment. However, evidence suggests that employment alone does not protect from poverty and exclusion. Almost 20% of adults who have an income below the poverty line are in employment. In addition, policies in relation to healthcare have focused on cost-effectiveness rather than improved outcomes. Thus, overall, it is recommended that Irish social and employment policies do not focus only on cost-effectiveness but instead centre on improved outcomes for people generally.
Italy	Italy has made progress in reforming its public administration and public services. However, improvements are needed to ensure a homogeneous level of social services throughout the country. To do so, it is recommended that Italy assesses public spending in social care and services and optimises existing resources, notably in the framework of the newly introduced Support for Active Inclusion programme.
Latvia	Municipalities are divided in three categories, depending on their financial capacities. The Municipal Finance Equalisation mechanism has been useful in mitigating differences and enhancing solidarity between municipalities. However, the provision and availability of social services across Latvia is still characterised by major discrepancies. It is therefore recommended that the Latvian Government define a basket of basic health and social care services, and takes measures to ensure its equal availability throughout Latvia, notably by allocating appropriate state funding for decentralised services.
Lithuania	The social assistance reform has made the system more flexible and targeted, while improving collaboration between stakeholders, especially local authorities and employment services. However, with a monthly social assistance cash benefit as low as EUR 102 and stricter eligibility criteria, it is not clear how the new law will impact on the most vulnerable. It is therefore advisable that the national government carries out impact assessments of the reform in terms of poverty, social exclusion and labour market integration.
Poland	The Polish Government has introduced significant increases in family benefits, which should help to reduce extreme family poverty. However, concerns have been expressed regarding the abolition of the free preschool year or raising the age of compulsory schooling to seven and the impact that it might have on child development and maternal employment. Participation in early childcare in Poland accounts for less than 10% in the 0 to 3 age group. It is therefore recommended that the government complement family benefits with early childcare services for children under compulsory school age (in particular children aged 0 to 3) as part of an integrated support strategy for children and families.

Portugal	Recent measures taken towards vulnerable groups have been useful but characterised by a lack of coordination. In the follow up to the crisis, several responsibilities in social care and services have been devolved to new stakeholders other than public social services (NGOs, foundations, charitable organisations), sometimes without clear long-term objectives. To ensure equal provision and availability of social services across Portugal, an integrated strategy should be drafted. It would guarantee basic standards of welfare, set a clear framework to combat poverty, and plan for the coordination of all measures and stakeholders.
Romania	Social services in Romania have suffered, among others, from low investment, poor coordination between services, and a lack of adapted responses at the local level, especially for people with complex needs. It is recommended that Romania steps up the modernisation of and capacity building in social services, especially in rural areas and marginalised communities. This can be done by better tailoring public social policies to local contexts, attracting competent professionals, assessing existing policies and services, and improving service planning.
Slovenia	Administrative processes, especially related to office and case management, have become outdated and time-consuming, impacting notably on social workers and administrators' working time and performance. It is therefore recommended that Slovenia speeds up the introduction of digital case management systems. This could free up time for frontline staff, smoothen administrative procedures and eventually, improve service quality for users.
Spain	In the absence of national standards and legislation in the field of social services, each region may decide on the composition of their own social community teams or the catalogue of services they provide, thus resulting in great variations across regions. To guarantee universal and equal service provision across the whole country, it is recommended that the national government works with the regions to establish common quality principles for social services across the whole country.
Sweden	Housing shortages are affecting an increasing number of people in Sweden. The refugee influx has made the situation even more challenging. 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. It is recommended that Sweden develops a national and inclusive housing policy based on cooperation between public and private stakeholders.
The Netherlands	Local authorities have been dramatically affected by budget cuts at the national level, while their responsibilities for social services have increased. For municipalities to be able to meet the challenge of the administrative reform, it is recommended that local authorities' prerogatives in terms of local finances be increased.
United Kingdom	Concerns were expressed, notably from Scottish members, about the potential impact of the United Kingdom leaving the UK ('Brexit'), especially in terms of European funding. The UK receives almost EUR 5 billion under the European Social Fund only. It is recommended that the UK Government proceeds to an immediate assessment of EU grant funding available for projects and assess the impact of its withdrawal on vulnerable groups.

4.1. Country profiles

Austria

The provision of social services is characterised by major regional disparities and the lack of a unified framework. Social services in Austria are largely funded at the regional level by the nine federal states ('Bundesländer'), each having their own legal and financial frameworks. There is no unified system of quality monitoring for social policy and services, except for child and youth welfare, for which minimum requirements for staff qualifications have been set at national level.

The Austrian Association of Social Workers (OBDS) notes that budget cuts have reduced the provision of social services. Significant differences exist between states. Whilst Carinthia, in the south of Austria, is going through financial difficulties, others are performing well. In addition, spending cuts often take the form of devolution where responsibility is passed from the regional level to municipalities without an accompanying supply of funds.

Net expenditures for social welfare increased by 11.5% between 2010 and 2014. Of this, 6.3% took place between 2013 and 2014 only[30]. The number of indebted municipalities went from 646 to 977 between 2011 and 2014, making it difficult, especially for smaller municipalities, to cope with increasing numbers of benefit recipients. In Lower Austria, funding for children's day care services has been halved from EUR 3.4 million to EUR 1.7 million.

The integration of asylum-seekers and migrants is a significant challenge. Austria was the fourth largest recipient of asylum seekers in the EU[31] in 2015. The level and nature of granted benefits varies from state to state. At national level, regulations targeted at asylum seekers and migrants mostly address primary care and the provision of education and training[32]. The response to the arrival of asylum-seekers has tended to come from the larger NGOs and social service providers[33], as their resources have been less affected than public social services. This is the case of church-run organisations such as Caritas and Diaconia Austria.

Benefit payments are too low to prevent poverty. In 2015, the poverty threshold was calculated to be EUR 1,161 per month, yet the combined housing and subsistence benefits totalled EUR 837 per month. The unemployed are the group most at risk of poverty in Austria. Their needs are primarily addressed by employment services' 'territorial employment pacts'[34], delivered and drafted by the Labour Market Administration (AMS), together with the federal states. Social services are not included in these pacts.

OBDS reveals that there is extensive criticism of the approach taken in supporting the unemployed, seen as repressive and too disciplinary in nature[35]. A wide breadth of

[30] Austrian Association of Municipalities (2015) Financial report on municipal budgets in 2015, page 80. http://gemeindebund.at/images/uploads/downloads/2015/Publikationen/Gemeindefinanzbericht/Gemeindefinanzbericht_2015_klein.pdf (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[31] Austria received 88,160 asylum requests in 2015. Source: Eurostat (2016) http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tps00191&plugin=1 (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[32] Federal Chancellery of the Republic of Austria (2004), Agreement between the federal state and the regions about joint measures for temporary provision of basic assistance to foreigners in need. https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/GeltendeFassung.wxe?Abfrage=Bundesnormen&Gesetzesnummer=20003460 (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[33] Herbert Langthaler/Helene Trauner (2009) Das österreichische Asylregime unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Rolle zivilgesellschaftlicher Organisationen [The Austrian asylum regime and the role of civil society organisations] http://www.sws-rundschau.at/archiv/SWS_2009_4_Langthaler.pdf (last accessed 16 October 2016)

[34] Austrian coordination office for territorial employment pacts (2011) Territorial employment pacts. An interim report. http://www.esf.at/esf/wp-content/uploads/TEP_2010_web.pdf (last accessed 14 October 2016)

[35] For an overview of ODBS' position papers on social policy in Austria: http://www.sozialarbeit.at/index.php?article_id=49&clang=0 (last accessed 14 October 2016)

analysis suggests that activation policies contribute to downwards social mobility and put pressure on the unemployed to accept jobs for which they may be over-qualified.

The youth coaching model is one example of Austria's success in working with young people. It is designed to prevent young people from becoming NEETs and is based on a social counselling model which brings together the AMS, schools and social service providers[36].

However, data on early school leavers and NEETs suggests that youth employment initiatives are failing young migrants. Inadequate language skills are preventing them from finding employment after leaving education. The third generation of young people of Turkish origin represent a growing proportion of the unskilled workforce[37].

Greater availability and quality of childcare is required. In 2015, Austria fell short of 17,000 child day care places because of counter-productive policies from the federal states. Only 26% of children under three years old attend day care facilities. To address this situation, the Ministry of Family Affairs has announced the creation of 8,500 extra nursery places in 2017[38].

Deinstitutionalisation (DI) in Austria has shown mixed results. According to OBDS, the DI process is going in the wrong direction for child protection**.** Youth welfare law, budgets, social planning and reporting are showing significant shortcomings in this area. DI is currently focussed on replacing traditional, fixed facilities (supervised flat-sharing, children's homes, foster care) with mobile or ambulatory services. Instead, OBDS recommends that more emphasis is placed on improving conditions and services in existing facilities.

There has been progress in the development of community-based services for adults with disabilities or mental health problems. Strategies such as providing a personal assistant to help with finding employment, education and leisure planning, in addition to a focus on promoting independent living have shown success[39]. The federal states have put in individually tailored and flexible solutions involving professional services, relatives and disabled people themselves[40].

[36] Federal Ministry for Work, Social Affairs and Consumer Protection (n.d.) Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan. Austria https://www.sozialministerium.at/cms/siteEN/attachments/8/0/1/CH3839/CMS1459340234319/youth-garantee-implementation-plan.pdf (last accessed 14 October 2016)

[37] Austrian Integration Funds (2010) Turkish migrants in Austria: figures, facts and attitudes. http://www.integrationsfonds.at/fileadmin/content/AT/Downloads/Publikationen/n13_Dossier_tuerkische_Migrantinnen_in_OEsterreich.pdf (last accessed 14 October 2016)

[38] Federal Ministry for Family and Youth (n. d.) Biggest investments in childcare provision are starting https://www.bmfj.gv.at/ministerin/Aktuelles/Themen/Beschluss-Ministerrat-15-a-Vereinbarung.html (last accessed 20.10.2016)

[39] Hubert Stockner (2011) Personal Assistance as way out the institutional segregation of people with disabilities. Report on independent living in Austria through means of personal assistance. http://bidok.uibk.ac.at/library/stockner-assistenz.html (last accessed 14 October 2016)

[40] See the example of the Steiermark Region at http://www.soziales.steiermark.at/cms/dokumente/11910254_108535217/8a076d76/Aktionsplan.pdf (last accessed 14 October 2016)

Belgium

There has not been progress towards achieving Belgium's targets on poverty and social exclusion. According to PPS Social Integration[41], the overall social situation in Belgium has remained fairly stable in recent years with no progress towards the social objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy. In fact, the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion has remained stable. However, there are differences across population groups. For example, the risk of poverty fell among older people, reaching a historically low rate for this age category[42]. The level of child poverty has remained broadly stable and below the EU average during and after the crisis (around 17%). Poverty has increased for specific groups in the working age population. The low-skilled and those living in households with very low work intensity face a higher rate of poverty at 14.6% than the average 11.9% in the euro area. The share of children living in (quasi-)jobless households is above the EU average[43].

The Individualised Project for Social Integration (IPSI) has been reformed. The IPSI, until now only applicable to people under 25, has been extended to all new beneficiaries of the integration income[44]. For people with restricted working capacity, a reintegration programme will be implemented with a view to increasing labour market participation through enhanced training.

The sixth state reform has had an impact on public social services. The reform[45] spans different areas of public social services, impacting the fields of social security and employment[46]. Social security contributions have been lowered for a limited number of target groups with the regions deciding autonomously which group they apply the reduction to. To enhance consistency, a cooperation agreement is going to be concluded between the regions in 2016.

In the field of employment, the regions of Wallonia and Flanders have set different priorities in the implementation of the sixth state reform. In Wallonia, the reform focuses on low and medium-skilled young people who have been unemployed for more than six months, the long-term unemployed and older workers (55+). In addition to these groups, Flanders has also included people with disabilities.

The recent refugee crisis has put additional pressure on integration. Much more investment is needed to provide services addressing urgent, complex, and multiple needs. The Brussels Capital Region will fund two reception offices for newcomers with a total capacity for 4,000 persons per year. This will allow the reception of any foreign adult who has been registered with the Region's municipal services for at least three years and possesses a residence permit for a period exceeding three months. Users will go through an assessment covering their social status, educational attainment, language skills and professional qualifications. The first office, with a capacity for 2,000 people, opened on 23 March 2016 and offers courses on rights and duties, citizenship, and French language.

The 'Flemish action plan against poverty 2015-2019'[47] contains specific measures addressing migrants. Emphasis is put on the development of methods for frontline practitioners to tackle poverty more effectively among people of

[41] PPS-Social integration is the Belgian federal public planning service for social integration.

[42] In 2015, the at-risk of poverty rate for the 65+ stood at 15.2%. It was 23% in 2007 (source: Eurostat).

[43] 13.1% as against 10.7% in the EU28 (source: Eurostat).

[44] See European Commission, Belgium - Integration income http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1102&langId=en&intPageId=2407 (last accessed 14 September 2016)

[45] Belgium. Official information and services (n.d.) http://www.belgium.be/en/about_belgium/country/history/belgium_from_1830/formation_federal_state/sixth_state_reform (last accessed 14 September 2016)

[46] J. Goossens and P. Cannoot (2015) Belgian Federalism after the Sixth State Reform, in: *Perspectives on Federalism*, Vol. 7, issue 2, 2015. http://www.on-federalism.eu/attachments/213_download.pdf (last accessed 14 September 2016)

[47] Vlaams Actieplan Armoedebestrijding 2015-2019. Available at: http://www4.vlaanderen.be/wvg/armoede/vlaamsactieplan/Documents/20150702_ontwerptekst%20VAPA%20-%20DEFINITIEF%20-%20BIS.pdf (last accessed 14 September 2016)

foreign origin. The Walloon Government has adopted a decree aiming to establish a compulsory integration pathway for all migrants who choose the Walloon Region as their place of residence. This pathway will include three obligatory elements, namely French language lessons, citizenship education and support for social and labour market integration[48]. The government of the French Community has also decided to create reception centres and schooling arrangements to cope with the arrival of new migrants[49].

The specific situation of **Roma people** has been acknowledged by Belgian authorities. The AMELIA+ project in Antwerp offers intensive support to 60 Roma people focusing on guidance and counselling for employment, education or training, giving special attention to the situation of Roma women.

EU funding has been used to support users' participation in public services. With the support of European funding, federal public services in Belgium have employed 'Experts by Experience in Poverty and in Social Exclusion'[50]. They can use their own experience to provide tailored support to other people in similar situations, develop proposals for service development, and stimulate reflection about the effectiveness of social policy and practice. Of these experts, 23 now work in 12 departments across different policy fields, such as social services, health care, justice, employment, and integration.

[48] Service public de Wallonie Direction générale opérationnelle des Pouvoirs locaux, de l'Action sociale et la Santé (2016) Un Parcours d'intégration wallon obligatoire. http://socialsante.wallonie.be/?q=news-parcours-integration-wallon-obligatoire (last accessed 14 September 2016)

[49] Coordination and initiatives for refugees and foreigners (2015) https://www.cire.be/analyses/1185-accueil-des-primo-arrivants-a-bruxelles-et-en-wallonie-vous-avez-dit-obligation (last accessed 14 September 2016)

[50] Casman et. al. (2010) Experts by Experience in Poverty and in Social Exclusion Innovation Players in the Belgian Federal Public Services http://vibrantcanada.ca/files/goede_praktijkenboek_engels_def.pdf (last accessed 14 September 2016)

Bulgaria

The regulation and financing of integrated social services should be addressed. The current arrangement of national funding and local provision presents challenges, particularly in relation to service integration. The future Social Services Act is expected to improve regulation, funding and the overall efficiency of social services.

Integrated service pilots have been implemented, mainly for groups most at risk of poverty and social exclusion. For example, integrated services to prevent the abandonment of children with disabilities and from ethnic minorities have been developed thanks to 2014-2020 European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) and funds from the World Bank.

The crisis has had long-lasting social consequences in Bulgaria. In 2013, 2014, and 2015, all but one of Bulgaria's regions were among the 10 EU regions with the lowest GDP per capita. This has led to significant inequalities and the emigration of young people. Schools have had to close in small towns (8 in 2015 and 27 in 2016) and many older people need home care and community-based support. ESI Funds are a major source of support for the provision of social services in these regions, but there are doubts about the sustainability of these services after EU funding is withdrawn.

As highlighted by the Commission's report, ESN's Bulgarian contributor underlines that social assistance schemes remain ineffective in reducing poverty. Changes were made to several social benefits with the 2015 amendment to the Social Assistance Act, aimed at enhancing parent's accountability. For example, benefits cancellation for parents of children dropping out of school and a shift to in-kind benefits instead of cash benefits for young mothers under 16.

Means-tested benefits have remained stable but the level of the general minimum income (GMI) is low (EUR 33 per month). In addition, the lack of coordination between employment, social services and benefits has prevented a significant number of people from accessing benefits they are theoretically eligible for, impacting directly on the most vulnerable. This situation could be improved by the new Centres for Employment and Social Assistance, where professionals from both sectors are in the same building and share information with each other. Introduced in 2015 and financed by the ESIF, the first evaluation of these centres will take place at the end of 2016.

Despite the existence of a National Roma Integration Strategy, the situation on the ground remains worrying, especially for children. The 2016 European Commission's report rightly points out that "the administrative capacity, resources and the mandate conferred to the National Roma Contact Point remain below standard"[51]. ESN's Bulgarian contributor suggests a stronger focus on indicators related to preschool access and inclusive school in addition to employment.

EU funds have contributed positively to social services development. As in 2015, ESN's Bulgarian contributor emphasises the highly positive contribution of EU funding to the development of quality services and projects at national level in the fields of employment, social inclusion and deinstitutionalisation. Two achievements deserve to be mentioned for the 2014-2020 period. Nearly 20,000 professionals have been trained to provide personal assistance for older people, as well as children and adults with disabilities, in the 265 Bulgarian municipalities. As for the development of community services, 149 small homes were built to accommodate 1,470 children in the past five years. Present and future developments include foster carers training, coordination with families to foster children with disabilities and the development of 'protected homes' for young people with disabilities located in cities to promote their social inclusion.

[51] European Commission (2016) Country report – Bulgaria (p.51).

Croatia

The crisis had an impact on both in-kind and cash social benefits. Budget cuts have affected the provision of previously free textbooks and maternity benefits, as well as social services such as support for older people, which used to be universal and free for users.

The financial state of counties and regions seems to determine the level of services, says the Croatian County Association (hereafter: The Association). While local authorities with greater financial means, notably around Zagreb and the coastal region, have could take over the financing of such programmes, others have been unable to maintain their previous, state-guaranteed level of services.

The Association notes that legislative powers fail to recognise the multidimensional nature of poverty. National authorities view poverty mainly through the lens of cash income, thus excluding other dimensions such as access to healthcare, housing and in-kind benefits.

The reform of the social welfare system could be jeopardised by a lack of political will. In particular, the merger of benefits under the Guaranteed Minimum Benefit, whilst desirable in theory, was postponed to 2017. Expected efficiency gains under this reform could include relieving social workers from a number of administrative tasks. This would allow them to allocate their time to core social work and supporting those who need it the most, enable better planning of social services and improving cooperation with NGOs. The Association mentions another caveat regarding the efficient implementation of the reform, namely the need to invest in capacity-building and experienced, qualified employees in the national administration[52].

The Association welcomes the introduction, by the Social Welfare Act, of the obligation for social and employment services to cooperate with each other[53].

The access to social assistance and unemployment benefits has been tightened. To ensure the appropriate targeting of social benefits and support, Croatia's main response has been to tighten eligibility criteria, to increase control over income-based provisions, and to condition the access to benefits to taking up employment, except for persons with disabilities. In particular, if an unemployed person refuses to take up an employment or training offer, as recommended in their individualised action plan, they risk losing their entitlement to the Guaranteed Minimum Benefit. Such work or training can be performed either in the form of regular employment, public works or community services. Public works are state-subsidised jobs ranging from 30 to 90 hours a month.

Furthermore, the Social Welfare Act excludes access to the Guaranteed Minimum Benefit for car owners, the car being seen as a luxury[54]. However, the Association notes that for people living in remote areas with limited access to public transport, having a car represents the only way they can travel to work or access health and social services.

The Association calls for the continuous improvement of the social protection system and increased transparency of expenditure in the field. To do so, the exchange of information between the local and regional level about beneficiaries' income and assets should be improved. The criteria and terminology related to the allocation of benefits should be standardised and data collection should be systematic.

Indebtedness has become one of the biggest social problems in Croatia. In the last few years, debt has been one of the main causes of social exclusion, homelessness,

[52] According to the European Commission's country report, Croatia's public administration is "weak and fragmented", translating "into a multiplication of functions and public bodies" (page 3).
[53] Regulations on the cooperation of social welfare centres and employment services, available (in Croatian) at: http://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2015_06_66_1266.html (last accessed 20.10.2016)
[54] Social Welfare Act, art. 29

family destruction and suicides. According to the Croatian Chamber of Psychology, the highest suicide rate was recorded in the Međimurje county. There, 40% of people need support to fight depression and 20% of the population have an alcohol abuse problem[55].

The Association only partially agrees with the European Commission's country report with regards to the cause of worsening indebtedness and with the housing situation. Although rapidly deteriorating conditions in the labour market and decreasing income may partially explain it, the expansion of credit in Swiss francs and the lack of financial regulation should not be overlooked, as they have allowed banks to make major profits at the expense of Croatian citizens. To support 75,000 citizens out of debt, the government adopted a set of measures aimed at forgiving the debts of citizens in specific situations. These measures are based on voluntary agreements with tele-operators, cities, banks and public enterprises, all of whom have "demonstrated social responsibility and social sensitivity" towards such extreme situations[56].

Foster care must be developed to strengthen community-based children's services. Specific efforts should be made to find and train foster parents for children with disabilities and behavioural problems.

In addition, psychosocial support services need to be developed throughout the country, with a focus on early intervention for children with disabilities. Parents and children often have to travel as far as Zagreb, the capital, to find specialised services, such as rehabilitation and therapy services. The current provision of such services, mainly done by NGOs, is insufficient to meet current needs. These services should be provided by integrated, multidisciplinary teams consisting of psychologists, therapists, occupational therapists, speech therapists and social workers.

When it comes to education, the Association broadly agrees with the measures listed by the country report to improve equal opportunities. They include the introduction of a national curriculum and a comprehensive structural reform of the primary and lower secondary education systems[57]. However, these measures might not suffice to bridge the gap between regions, mitigate the aftermath of the economic crisis, and address specific problems for certain population groups, such as the integration of Roma children in education and their families.

[55] Croatian Journal of Public Health (2011) Indicators of the health status of the population of Međimurje County. Available at: http://hcjz.hr/index.php/hcjz/article/viewFile/431/417 (last accessed 20.10.2016)

[56] Government of the Republic of Croatia, National Social Report (2015). Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=14269&langId=en (last accessed 20.10.2016)

[57] European Commission (2016) Country report – Croatia (p.82)

Cyprus

The economic crisis has had a severe impact in social services provision. The provision of services has not kept pace with rising demand and needs during the crisis, but has instead been redirected to those who are most in need. Municipalities were the first hit by budget cuts from central government. Their funding was drastically reduced – from EUR 104 million in 2010 to EUR 70 million in 2016. This amounts to circa 35%.

Municipalities have had to reassess all social services and programmes based on their effectiveness to address local socio-economic needs. As a response to cuts, most municipalities have promoted a pluralistic model of support in the form of new services networks. This model, encouraged by the Union of Cyprus Municipalities (UCM), involves local authorities delivering services jointly with the state, voluntary organisations such as churches, foundations, and the private sector. Some local authorities have turned to local churches for support, whose subsidies have not been affected, whilst others have had to reintroduce food banks.

There is a need to give value to the role of municipalities in social services provision. In Cyprus, the Ministry of Labour and Welfare is responsible for all social welfare policies. However, services are fragmented and there is no systematic coordination between stakeholders. National social policy (social planning, research, evaluation and feedback) should be the result of the common efforts of a network involving municipalities, says UCM. Coordination is the primary way to obtain savings and efficiency gains to benefit those who need social care and support the most.

Coordination mechanisms between local social services and national employment services should be developed. There is no coordination between local authorities and national employment services, according to UCM. However, local authorities implement programmes to support people's access to the labour market, especially women, through early childhood education and care (ECEC) services, day care services for older people, and training programmes (IT, languages).

The UCM welcomes the introduction of the Guaranteed Minimum Income (GMI), but also calls for raising its absolute value, which currently stands at EUR 480 per month.

Finally, the UCM calls for government-led incentives for private companies so that they can hire long-term unemployed graduates to prevent them from finding employment abroad. According to the Union, they are needed for the economy to restart.

Further investment in ECEC services is needed, especially for children up to four years old, four being the age of compulsory schooling. Municipalities have no responsibility for ECEC, which in practice means that only some municipalities provide services such as childminders or crèches, while child participation in ECEC depends greatly on parental income. Even if the municipalities provided ECEC, the law requires that there is one professional for every six children[58], a cost that would be unmanageable for most local authorities.

The integration of migrants is a major challenge. The recent migration crisis has not triggered any changes in service provision with services still discontinuous, overlapping with each other, and characterised by a lack of funding. The UCM recommends that the focus be put on enhancing coordination between the central government, local authorities and NGOs. Successful programmes, aimed at both third-country nationals and local communities, have been developed with the support of the European Integration Fund:

1. A comprehensive package of activities and services, provided by local authorities for third country nationals, including social support, training, education, counselling, cultural exchanges and information on local living conditions.
2. A study and compilation of best practices for inclusion and support.

[58] More specifically: one professional for every three infants (under two years old) for home-based services; one professional for every six infants (under two) and one professional for every group of 16 to 24 children (between two and four years old) in crèches.

EU funding has successfully contributed to the support of the most vulnerable at local level. Co-funded by the European Social Fund and the social welfare services of the Cyprus Government, the '**Social Street Work'** initiative, implemented between 2012 and 2014, was acknowledged by the UCM as good practice. Carried out in each municipality, its has been targeted at the most vulnerable groups, such as early school leavers, the unemployed, vulnerable families and people suffering from drug and alcohol addictions, with an aim to support their enrolment in education and training through counselling, while boosting their self-esteem, confidence and employability.

Czech Republic

Decentralisation in the past two years has exacerbated difficulties in regards to social services' financing and organisation, says the Czech Association of Social Care Providers (APSS ČR). Financing and service provisions conditions differ greatly in the 14 counties, while the administrative burden on service providers has increased [59]. APSS recommends that the government adjusts and unifies the financing criteria for all social service providers in the country.

Quality levels are uneven too. Quality controls are limited to the assessment of formal internal procedures and regulations, rather than user's outcomes. Quality standards are vague and subject to various interpretations. In this respect, no progress was recorded compared to last year.

In terms of service organisation, APSS explains that local social services could be better coordinated through 'social services networks'. In the view of APSS, the Czech Republic does have the necessary instruments to carry out social work and social intervention, including case management, counselling and emergency intervention. However, the coordination of stakeholders at community level is more challenging. The draft amendment to the Act on Social Services is a positive step towards improving this coordination, as it clarifies public procurement rules and competition principles for service providers.

The current poverty and social exclusion situation is more complex than indicators show. The Czech Republic's economy has experienced a 4.5% GDP increase (versus 2.2% in the EU28). Moreover, the country "recorded the lowest level of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the whole EU (14.8 % versus 24.4 %)[60]". APSS and a number of experts questioned the relevance of poverty indicators, which mainly quantitative and with potentially arbitrary threshold effects[61]. This may hide the complexity of the situation experienced on the ground by social service professionals, who report increasing numbers of clients and levels of material deprivation[62].

There has been mixed progress regarding children's services. Improvement has been recorded in the field of inclusive education. CZK 119 million (around EUR 4.5 million) has been allocated to recruiting and training teaching assistants for socially disadvantaged pupils, as well as developing outreach programmes and low-threshold services and facilities for children. The aim is to improve

[59] These discrepancies were the subject of a letter sent by the President of the Czech Union of Employers' Associations (UZS ČR) to the Minister of Labour and social affairs on 16 May 2016.
[60] European Commission (2016) Country report – Czech Republic
[61] Daniel Prokop (2013) Zdroje tekutého hněvu [Let's not deny poverty anymore] https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/nazory-a-komentare/komentar-zdroje-tekuteho-hnevu-uz-nezapirejme-chudobu/r~a86dfe163cd611e3bd2b0025900fea04/?redirected=1475680184 (last accessed 20 October 2016) Markéta Horáková, Robert Jahoda, Pavel Kofroň, Tomáš Sirovátka, Ivana Šimíková (2013) Příjmová chudoba a materiální deprivace v České republice podle indikátorů EU - vývoj v důsledku krize, fiskální konsolidace a sociální reform [Income poverty and material deprivation in the Czech Republic as measured by the EU - crisis, fiscal consolidation and social reform] VÚPSV [Research Institute of Labour and Social Affairs], Prague 2013.
[62] Source: informal feedback.

their attendance at preschool and prevent early school leaving. These services include the preparation of children for school, the development of good learning habits and safe houses for mothers and their children. As these services have been financed by EU funds, ensuring their continuation by the municipalities will be challenging.

As for early childcare for children under three, pilot projects should give way to establishing a network of services. The European Social Fund has funded a pilot programme of the so-called mini-nurseries[63]. Kindergartens have also grown[64]. However, the obligation to pay for children's meals prevents some parents from sending their children to kindergarten altogether. In 2016, CZK 172 million (around EUR 6.3 million) of the Fund for European Aid to the most Deprived (FEAD) is being used to cover these costs.

Mixed progress has been recorded in deinstitutionalisation (DI). Foster care has contributed to the deinstitutionalisation of children's services. In 2015, there were 12,000 foster carers, an increase of 2,700 compared to 2012. Foster care has been professionalised through the training of foster parents, independent evaluation of foster carers and improved remuneration. Early intervention services and multidisciplinary teams have helped families who have children with disabilities to support or improve parents' capacities to raise their children at home.

The number of people with disabilities (children and adults) living in institutions was reduced from 16,638 in 2012 to 12,612 in 2016[65]. Thanks to EU funding, 40 institutional facilities across the country have transformed their social services to community-based ones since 2013[66]. According to APSS, the main challenge consists in supporting people with the most complex needs (those who need care 24 hours a day) while being financially sustainable. Deinstitutionalisation of mental health care has been more challenging and is still dominated by a medical, hospital-led approach. Only the South Moravian Region has introduced systematic, coordinated community-based health and social care for people with severe mental health problems.

EU funding has been used to develop employment and social services. 'Promoting social integration at local and regional level' is a successful EU-funded programme supporting the unemployed. In 2015, it provided methodological assistance and tools to help municipalities to create their own local social inclusion strategies. Such tools included an 'Information package for people in need'[67], as well as surveys and methodological guides for social workers on helping people out of debt and improving access to healthcare for homeless people.

Another project aimed at 'Transforming care for vulnerable children and families[68]' had positive outcomes in the five counties where it was tested out. Based on the Dutch model 'Eigen Kracht' (literally 'your own force'), the programme aimed to develop new services, improve social work practice and professionalise foster care.

[63] Mini-nurseries or 'child groups' can care for up to 24 children. They are not-for-profit organisations offering an alternative type of childcare, based on the Austrian 'Kindergruppe' model. Source: European Union portal, European Platform for Investing in children, Country profiles. http://europa.eu/epic/countries/czech-republic/index_en.htm (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[64] 18 kindergartens received funding for their expansion in 2016. Source: Ministry of Education http://www.msmt.cz/ministerstvo/fond-rozvoje-kapacit-materskych-a-zakladnich-skol?lang=1 (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[65] See 'Hradecké dny sociální práce se zaměří na péči v rodinném prostředí' [The Social Work days of the University of Hradec focus on care in a family environment']. Available at: http://www.mpsv.cz/files/clanky/27047/TZ_-_Hradecke_dny_socialni_prace.pdf (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[66] The 2007-2013 ESF Operational Programme 'Human resources and employment' was approved in October 2016. http://www.strukturalni-fondy.cz/en/Fondy-EU/Programove-obdobi-2007-2013/Programy-2007-2013/Tematicke-operacni-programy/OP-Lidske-zdroje-a-zamestnanost (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[67] See: 'Promoting social inclusion at local and regional level' http://www.mpsv.cz/cs/22832 and http://www.mpsv.cz/files/clanky/24163/1_10.10-10.30_PavlikovaE_Predstaveni_projektu.pdf (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[68] See more at: http://www.pravonadetstvi.cz/vyhledavani/?f_Act=Hledat&f_hledane=Eigen&f_ActSubmit.x=20&f_ActSubmit.y=14 and http://www.mpsv.cz/cs/14322 (last accessed 20 October 2016)

Denmark

In the context of the recent labour market reform, a stronger focus should be put on those furthest from the labour market. Workforce supply in the context of demographic ageing was reported to be the biggest problem addressed by recent government reforms, which were perceived to be a "step in the right direction" by the Danish Association of Social Services Directors (FSD). However, these programmes should address groups on the margins of the labour market, such as people with disabilities or severe mental health problems and migrants if they are to achieve their objectives.

The unemployment rate for these groups has remained stable, despite positive initiatives such as online job databases for people with disabilities[69] and increased cooperation with private companies, eg: supermarket chains. FSD recommends drafting specific active inclusion strategies for these groups, actively involving private companies and reflecting on the efficiency of existing forms of support in the workplace. Employers should be informed about the opportunities of hiring people with disabilities or with mental health problems and be encouraged to create person-centred job opportunities for groups with complex needs.

An individual assessment is carried out for each migrant to clarify their professional and personal needs. The aim is to encourage their inclusion in society, including their integration in the labour market. Refugees must start an internship within a month after their arrival in Denmark. They can also participate in the 'Education for integration' (IGU) programme, a short-term job at an apprentice salary level. These jobs can last for up to two years while refugees are also offered on-the-job training or education courses lasting up to 20 weeks[70].

Eligibility criteria for social benefits have been tightened. Recent government policies, namely the 'social benefits cap' and the 'integration benefit'[71], have led to benefits reductions with the intention to incentivise taking up paid work. As a consequence, 49,000 people have been warned that their benefits could decrease in the near future. Whilst FSD acknowledges the importance of incentivising both nationals and non-nationals to take up work, they expect that a high number of households will be unable to cover their rent because of these cuts. This could put additional pressure on the organisations providing temporary housing.

Particularly for refugees, reducing benefits will probably mean increased difficulty with covering high housing costs, threaten their social participation and increase their risk of becoming homeless. Overall, these reforms are expected to increase exclusion and the risk of poverty for those who are already vulnerable, for example families with children and the unemployed. At the same time, these groups will need to be supported by local social services, which is likely to result in higher local expenditure in the field of social support. To compensate such increase, local authorities may have to reduce expenditure in other areas.

Youth unemployment has declined, but remains a matter of concern. Successful initiatives include 'mentors' for young unemployed and/or vulnerable people, hired as volunteers by social workers in local job centres. Mentors are supposed to provide educational and professional guidance, as well as psycho-emotional support. Research suggests significant results in terms of educational progress and labour market integration[72].

[69] An example of such a database is Ijobnu - The direct link between businesses and people with disabilities www.ijobnu.dk (last accessed 13 September 2016)

[70] Eurofound (2016) Denmark: Tripartite agreement on the integration of refugees http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/observatories/eurwork/articles/working-conditions-industrial-relations/denmark-tripartite-agreement-on-integration-of-refugees (last accessed 13 September 2016)

[71] The Danish Government (2016) Denmark's National Reform Programme 2016; on 'social benefits cap', see p. 37, on 'integration benefit', see p. 38. http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/csr2016/nrp2016_denmark_en.pdf (last accessed 13 September 2016)

The number of homeless young people has increased[73], a phenomenon that needs to be taken "very seriously", according to FSD, given the impact of homelessness on young people's educational and professional pathways and their general inclusion in society. Local authorities have implemented several measures to combat the rising number of homeless young people, drawing on the national homelessness strategy[74]. For example, following the 'Housing First' approach[75], social services collaborate with housing associations, educational providers and volunteer organisations to provide permanent quality accommodation – a prerequisite to be able to improve gradually the young person's life situation.

Estonia

The European Commission's country report adequately identifies all current social issues in Estonia, according to the Social Welfare and Health Care Department of Tartu City Government (hereafter 'Tartu'). Tartu also considers that the increase in the subsistence benefit scheme to EUR 130 as of 1 January 2016, planned by the Social Welfare Act, is particularly positive. However, official statistics suggest that an individual needs EUR 203 to be able to cover his or her basic needs[76].

The new 2016-2023 Welfare Development Plan contains positive measures for the future of social services in Estonia. Its purpose is to create a strategic approach and develop measures and activities that support independent living, create equal opportunities for social and labour market participation, improve social protection and mainstream gender equality. It is too early to provide a comprehensive assessment of the Plan, adopted by the Estonian Government on 7 April 2016 and still to be approved by the Parliament[77].

The 'Work Ability reform'[78] started on 1 January 2016 with the provision of employment rehabilitation services. In July, the second stage started, consisting in reassessing the situation of disability benefits recipients, who account for a significant share of the working population. This goes along a shift towards activation on the basis of more rigid reviews of benefits[79]. The system will be fully operational in January 2017, starting with the re-assessment of current beneficiaries.

The performance of children's services in Tartu is seen as good by our contributor[80], especially in regards to the participation of

[72] Styrelsen for Arbejdsmarked og Rekruttering (2015) Evaluering af mentorordningen [Mentoring evaluation]. http://star.dk/da/Om-STAR/Publikationer/2015/03/Evaluering-af-mentorordningen.aspx (last accessed 13 September 2016)

[73] The Danish Institute for Human Rights (2015) Human rights in Denmark status 2014-15. A summary, page 51. http://menneskeret.dk/files/media/dokumenter/udgivelser/status/2014-15/status_uk_2015.pdf (last accessed 13 September 2016)

[74] Socialstyrelsen (2016) Hjemløsestrategiens resultater [Homelessness results] http://socialstyrelsen.dk/projekter-og-initiativer/voksne/udbredelses-og-forankringsprojektet-1/copy_of_udbredelse-af-hjemlosestrategien/om-projektet/hjemlosestrategiens-resultater (last accessed 13 September 2016)

[75] See FEANTSA (European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless) (2016) Housing First Guide Europe http://www.feantsa.org/spip.php?article3906&lang=en (last accessed 20.10.2016)

[76] Source: Statistics Estonia (2014)

[77] The Baltic Course (2016) Government okays Estonia's Welfare Development Plan 2016-2023 http://www.baltic-course.com/eng/analytics/?doc=119122 (last accessed 16 September 2016)
For a more comprehensive overview of reform measures: Government of the Republic of Estonia (n.d.) Estonia 2020 Action Plan 2015-2020. Action plan for, and implementation time of each measure by challenge. https://riigikantselei.ee/sites/default/files/content-editors/Failid/eesti2020/eesti2020_action_plan_en_05.05.16.pdf (last accessed 16 September 2016)

[78] Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs (2016) Work Ability Reform https://www.sm.ee/en/work-ability-reform (last accessed 16 September 2016)

[79] European Commission (2015) ESPN – Flash report 2015/12. Work capacity reform – Change in the assessment criteria. http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=13755&langId=en (last accessed 16 September 2016)

[80] For an overview of the Estonian childcare system: EURAXESS Estonia (2016) Day care centres and schools http://euraxess.ee/incoming-researchers/family/day-care-centres-schools/ (last accessed 16 September 2016)

children in childcare under the age of three[81]. Tartu has significantly invested in the field by setting up 246 new places in the year 2014-2015. In addition, 340 children under the age of three were accommodated in private childcare facilities.

Community-based alternatives for children with disabilities, especially foster care, should be developed and receive additional funding. A positive development in the field is the recent creation of regional mental health centres for children. Led by hospitals[82], these centres involve teams of social workers, psychiatrists and nurses working together with care workers, psychologists, child protection specialists and police officers in schools.

The new Child Protection Act will bring major changes in the field. The law entered into force on 1 January 2016[83]. In each regional child protection centre, which is the office representing the National Social Protection Agency in the regions, a child protection unit was set up. These regional centres have a role in consultation and guidance and work in cooperation with child protection services in local authorities, the police and health care specialists. At national level, a Child Protection Council was established, whose role is to make legislative proposals to the government to guarantee children's welfare and rights, as well as to promote "cross-sectoral preventive measures in child protection[84]".

Estonia has increased the number of long-term care beds and started the deinstitutionalisation of services for people with learning and psychosocial disabilities. The number of long-term care beds was raised to respond to existing shortages. For people with disabilities, additional supported housing was created in the community. Pilot projects have been set up to further advance the integration of social and health care services. One such pilot project has been taking place in the hospital in Viljandi county since autumn 2016.

[81] For a general overview of childcare provision in Tartu: Tartu City Government (2015) Preschool childcare institutions. http://www.tartu.ee/?lang_id=2&menu_id=12&page_id=2638 (last accessed 16 September 2016)

[82] An example from Tallinn: EEA/Norway grants (n. d.) Establishing children's mental health centre (part of Tallinn children's hospital. http://eeagrants.org/project-portal/project/EE08-0001 (last accessed 16 September 2016) Example from Tartu: EEA/Norway grants (n. d.) South-Estonian mental health centre for children and youngsters. http://eeagrants.org/project-portal/project/EE08-0010 (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[83] Riigi Teataja [The State gazette] Child Protection Act https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/506052015001/consolide (last accessed 16 September 2016)

[84] Riigi Teataja [The State gazette] Child Protection Act https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/506052015001/consolide (last accessed 16 September 2016)

Finland

The re-centralisation of health and social services requires clarity on administrations' roles and responsibilities. Unlike other countries which have decentralised their services to the local level, Finland is undergoing a 're-centralisation' process of its health and social care services[85]. Previously provided at the local level, health and social care will become the responsibility of 18 counties, and will be organised through 12 hospitals and five collaborative areas. This reform is already creating tensions between regional and local authorities, while the central government takes increased financial and planning control over services. The National Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) produced an impact assessment of the draft law[86], which points to the lack of clarity over the division of responsibilities between different public authorities, the general governance structure, and the relationship between public authorities and service providers.

Regarding support for the unemployed, such as sheltered and subsidised work, this should be a shared responsibility between regional health and social care services and the municipalities. The long-term unemployed have multidimensional needs that require a comprehensive response. It will be crucial for employment services to cooperate with other services to maintain or restore employability, but also to ensure people's general health and wellbeing.

The new 'free choice model' is a major component of the reform. Although broadly seen as a valuable initiative by the ESN Finnish contributors, it has been controversial due, among others, to the lack of impact assessment (*see also our box below*).

A basic income trial is due to start in 2017. Before being introduced, a comprehensive analysis was undertaken by the Finnish Social Insurance Institution (Kela). The study will be followed by pilots in the beginning of 2017 that should "establish whether [it] could be the solution for reducing poverty and social exclusion and simplify the social benefits system[87]". ESN contributors warn that this trial may be an additional structural reform that could put additional pressure on local authorities, already engaged in a major reform of their health and social care services. This initiative has also been criticised as "outrageously expensive" by some economists[88].

Various financial measures have hit older people's finances. These include the increase in medicine costs and out of pocket payments, but in November 2015 the Finnish Government backed down on planned cuts to housing allowances for pensioners[89], saying the cuts would have had unreasonable effects, notably for low-income pensioners. The Finnish contributors still expect the government to apply further budget cuts to local authorities, which will mean that professionals, who have so far been reluctant to apply higher fees, will be in the future compelled to do so.

The migration challenge was aggravated in 2015. Finland welcomed 32,000 new asylum seekers in 2015. On average, 25-30% of asylum seekers obtain permanent residence in Finland. To ensure their effective inclusion, local authorities have started several targeted programmes. However, ESN Finnish contributors are not aware of any assessment of the quality of those programmes. Therefore, they recommend that practices be evaluated,

[85] The draft laws on the health, social services and regional government reform have been put to consultation since 31 August and until 9 November 2016.
[86] National Institute for Health and Welfare Observations, Draft Law of the Act on Organising Health and Social Services http://www.julkari.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/131123/PT2016_005_English_verkko.pdf?sequence=1 (last accessed 20 October 2016)
[87] European Commission (2016) Country report – Finland
[88] Kela (2016) The Finnish basic income experiment – a foolish and outrageously expensive travesty? (in English) http://blogi.kansanelakelaitos.fi/arkisto/3316 (last accessed 20 October 2016)
[89] European Social Network (2015) Looking ahead: Local public social services priorities for the European Semester 2016. Available at: http://www.esn-eu.org/news/727/index.html

and that best practices are shared between municipalities.

There have been cuts on education, which seem contrary to the aim of reducing youth unemployment. For Finland, a forerunner of the Youth Guarantee, these cuts could limit the possibility of local stakeholders to offer tailor-made paths for young people through education. The Association expects future statistics to demonstrate this negative trend.

The early retirement of young people suffering from mental health problems – mainly schizophrenia – is still a national issue. The number of early retirement of young persons has remained stable but the number of young people aged 16-24 who become inactive because of mental health disorders has increased from 0,6% (2007) to 1,0% (2014)[90].

The 'Free choice model' in Finland

The new 'free choice model' is a major component of the Finnish health and social care reform. It was put forward by the government in 2015 as a way to "put the patient in the driver's seat[91]" by increasing choice models and provider competition by 2019. Although broadly seen as a valuable initiative by the ESN Finnish contributors, it has been controversial, as pointed out in several studies[92]. It is not clear what the actual choice for users will be in practice, for instance in rural area where long distances could in fact reduce choice. Moreover, the 18 counties will have to adopt a common approach to the development and implementation of services to ensure equal access and availability of services, which seems difficult to implement in practice[93].

[90] Source: Sotkanet: Statistical information of health and wellbeing. https://www.sotkanet.fi/sotkanet/en/haku?indicator=szbxtzYNtU4JijeyTskFEsmF1obe1oZhAA==&region=s07MBAA=&year=sy4rtTbS0zW01jUF0wA=&gender=t&abs=f&color=f (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[91] Tynkkynen, Saloranta, Chydenius, Keskimäki (2015) Expanding choice of primary care in Finland: much debate but little change so far. Available at: http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0168851016000294 (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[92] See for instance: Junnila et al 2016, Sinervo et al 2016 (National Institute for Health and Welfare - THL); Brommels et al 2016 - expert group of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health; Heikki Hiilamo and Martti Kekomäki (University of Helsinki).

[93] National Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) (2016) 12 Observations on the Draft Law of the Act on Organising Health and Social Services. Policy brief. (in English) http://alueuudistus.fi/documents/1477425/3114116/THL+evaluation+12+Observations+updated.pdf (last accessed 20 October 2016)

France

Despite administrative reforms implemented over the past six years, there are still significant overlaps between layers of public administration. According to the French Association of Directors of Social Services (ANDASS), there are several duplications in the field of social services, for which counties (*départements)* are responsible[94]. These include:

- *Child protection*: although led at county level, a few child and youth protection measures are still performed by the central government through 'Regional Directorates for Youth Judicial Protection' (PJJ). The PJJ has a very small budget, and operates less than 1% of cases, but it is present at several decision levels (such as the authorisation of new facilities).

- *Disability*: while the central government (through regional health agencies) is responsible for (i) all children with disabilities and (ii) adults with very severe disabilities (eg multiple disabilities), the local level is responsible for adults with intermediate to severe disabilities (eg intellectual deficiencies without physical disabilities, psychosis).

- *Children's services*: while services for children with disabilities depend on the regional level, child protection services are the responsibility of the local level. Those services are poorly integrated, resulting in a lack of available space in specialised facilities, of psychiatric support, and permanence of placements. Some facilities may close on week-ends (such as the 'medico-pedagogic institutes'), forcing children to move to foster families or other facilities for this short period. This is confusing for children and rather inefficient in terms of public spending, says ANDASS. Children and disability policies and services should be integrated.

- *Social inclusion (local level) and employment (national level) services:* coordination between these two services has improved, especially through the 'Global assistance programme[95]' (supported by the European Social Fund). This trend should be reinforced.

Therefore, ANDASS supports the further integration of a number of interdependent social services currently managed at different organisational levels – local, regional and/or national.

Priority should be given to fighting inequalities related to rents and capital, which are unfair and do not stimulate the economy. This is particularly the case for rents arising from regulated professions, real-estate rents, especially in cities, and rents arising from excessive intellectual property rights.

France's high unemployment rate (10.5% in August 2016) threatens the social inclusion of a large part of the population. This figure should however be balanced by other criteria. For instance, France is one of the few OECD countries where inequalities of salary are being reduced, and ranks within the top OECD countries in terms of female employment.

The existence of a relatively high minimum wage (EUR 1,466.62 gross per month) certainly impacts on the relatively low inequality of salaries (in comparison with other European countries), but it is recognised that it might have an adverse effect on the employment rate. However, ANDASS does not believe that reducing unemployment should be achieved by increasing wage inequality.

Compared with other OECD countries, France has been successful in limiting child poverty. France has combined general measures aimed at reducing inequalities and

[94] About the responsibilities of local authorities in France: http://www.vie-publique.fr/decouverte-institutions/institutions/collectivites-territoriales/competences-collectivites-territoriales/quelles-sont-competences-exercees-par-departements.html (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[95] In 2014, in the framework of the multi-annual plan against poverty, the state, the Association of County councils and the national public employment service (Pole emploi) signed an agreement for a "global approach of support to the most vulnerable unemployed". More at: http://www.pole-emploi.org/informations/conseil-general-@/1227/view-category-19485.html (last accessed 20 October 2016)

fighting poverty to support parents and their children. These include minimum wage, minimum guaranteed income and healthcare benefits with specifically targeted measures, eg: a specific allowance for single parents, childcare support and housing allowance. However, as mentioned in last year's report[96], it is challenging for education and social services to compensate for inherited inequalities[97].

The proportion of children placed in foster care (as opposed to institutional care) varies immensely across counties – from 20% to as much as 90%. Such discrepancies call for a national strategy for child protection, which should be complemented by evaluations.

Local authorities are minimally involved in the fight against early school leaving. Measures taken at national level mainly consist of allocating more teaching time in areas with high dropout rates, and do not involve the *départements*. ANDASS believes that their experience in social inclusion and child protection could be useful to complement national measures and promote an innovative approach to fighting early school leaving at the local level.

The lack of affordable housing in cities is one of France's most worrying social and economic problems. High housing prices are limiting opportunities for first-time buyers, which is weighing on economic competitiveness and deepening inequalities. The government's response has mainly consisted of rent subsidies, which have driven rents up and enriched owners. Alternatively, ANDASS supports a major increase in housing supply by building new houses[98].

Deinstitutionalisation has been going on for three decades. In France, the focus has been put on the user's choice of their own support and accommodation, rather than on closing all institutional services[99]. Closing these institutions in the past resulted in a lack of available places for those who need them, especially those with complex needs.

ANDASS welcomes the adoption of a national programme for social work and social development[100], which includes measures aiming at improving social workers' development and training.

[96] European Social Network (2015) Looking ahead: Local public social services priorities for the European Semester 2016. Available at: http://www.esn-eu.org/news/727/index.html

[97] Piketty, T. (2014) Capital in the Twenty-First Century. Belknap Press. First published as Le capital au XXI siècle, copyright © 2013 Éditions du Seuil.

[98] This was suggested by ANDASS in April 2016 in their contribution to the Sirugue report 'Repenser les minima sociaux: Vers une couverture socle commune' [Rethink minimum incomes: Towards a common basic coverage]

[99] 'Une réponse accompagnée pour tous' [A Solution for All]. The bill is expected to enter into force in 2017. It foresees the obligation for the state to provide an appropriate support package for each disabled person, which will require a major investment in favour of people with disabilities.

[100] Plan d'action en faveur du travail social et du développement social.

Germany

Regional differences in municipalities' financial resources affect social services. For instance, the richest municipalities in Bavaria are able to spend about 20 times as much on public infrastructure as for instance, Wilhelmshaven in the North. In addition, poorer municipalities have to spend a much greater proportion of their finances on social benefits and have fewer resources for youth, social and community work. As representatives from the City of Cologne explained, for poorer municipalities it has even become challenging to fund or facilitate charitable and voluntary work. Municipalities therefore have been calling for a more just distribution of resources and costs across the country to foster equality and even out regional disparities in wealth and opportunities.

The reception of over half a million asylum-seekers and many more refugees in 2015 posed new challenges for municipalities across Germany. In Cologne, the local authority works with the job centres, private companies and non-profit organisations to facilitate the integration of refugees into the labour market. The programme CHANCE+ Network Refugees and Work [101], which supports labour market integration of refugees through personalised career advice, in-work training and education, is funded in the framework of the European Social Fund federal programme. The work of volunteers across the country is, in many parts, vital to the support of refugees and includes the provision of clothing, advice on daily activities and access to services.

The rapid increase in the number of people seeking international protection in Germany has exacerbated the already severe shortage of social housing in many cities, particularly in Berlin, Hamburg and Munich. In Cologne, there is a lack of space to build new homes and strict regulation often delays permission to construct them. To tackle these bureaucratic hurdles, building standards are now slowly being reformed, but building enough social housing to enable refugees to leave mass accommodation as quickly as possible is still a major challenge.

Poverty and social exclusion are increasing. As the Commission's country report highlights, this is particularly the case among the unemployed and older people. Some regions have developed their own plans against poverty. This is the case in North Rhine-Westphalia, where the regional government developed in 2014 an action plan against poverty and social exclusion[102], in collaboration with citizens and civil society organisations. The plan focuses on the social environment and the need to encourage solidarity in local communities. Professional services and voluntary initiatives and community work are encouraged to work together against social exclusion.

Germany needs to strengthen the rights and participation of people with disabilities. This was the request of the United Nations' Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) to the German Government in its concluding observations on the initial report for Germany in 2015[103]. The Committee criticised the persistence of parallel structures in the labour market, housing and education that prevent people with disabilities from living in their own homes instead of institutions, work in the mainstream labour market instead of sheltered workshops, and to be educated in mainstream schools with adequate support instead of special needs schools. Free choice, in

[101] Jobcentre Cologne, Chance+ Netzwerk Flüchtlinge und Arbeit http://www.jobcenterkoeln.de/site/chance/ (last accessed 12 September 2016)

[102] Regional Government of North Rhine-Westphalia (2015) NRW hält zusammen…für ein Leben ohne Armut und Ausgrenzung [North Rhine-Westphalia sticks together… for a life without poverty and exclusion] https://www.mais.nrw/sites/default/files/asset/document/erster_bericht_2015_endfassung.pdf (last accessed 12 September 2016)

[103] United National Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2015) Concluding observations on the initial report of Germany. http://www.institut-fuer-menschenrechte.de/fileadmin/user_upload/PDF-Dateien/Pakte_Konventionen/CRPD_behindertenrechtskonvention/crpd_state_report_germany_1_2011_ConObs_2015_en.pdf (last accessed 12 September 2016)

particular for people with psychosocial disabilities is all too often disregarded.

The Committee called as well for better protection of the integrity of people with disabilities, eg: by avoiding using involuntary treatment or placement; as well as for the better protection of girls and women from violence and abuse, and of older people in care. The new Bundesteilhabegesetz[104] (Federal Participation Act), which is still open to consultation, is intended to foster the participation and self-determination of people with disabilities and bring policies in line with the CRPD.

Measures to foster participation in education for children from disadvantaged families are progressing. Municipalities continue to implement the 2011 education and participation package (Bildungs- und Teilhabepaket[105]), which promotes the educational participation of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. A variety of subsidies are available for children and teenagers from low-income families or those on jobseekers' allowance. Basic assistance for asylum seekers, including school/kindergarten trips, educational material, extracurricular activities and private tuition and school meals are also available. About 2.5 million children and adolescents were supported in 2015.

Whilst the law supports children directly through vouchers, representatives from the social services department of the City of Cologne highlighted the bureaucratic difficulties that prevent many eligible families from applying for support. Every voucher or activity must be applied for separately and for each child individually, creating high administrative costs and making it difficult for many families to understand what their children are eligible for.

Greece

Greece is undergoing a three-year economic adjustment programme, which will run until August 2018. The European Stability Mechanism programme is based on a 'Memorandum of Understanding' between the Greek Parliament and the euro area finance ministers, which spells out reforms to address Greece's challenges. The Social Solidarity, Welfare and Equality Department of the Municipality of Athens advise that social assistance (understood as a combination of benefits and services) should be excluded from the supervision of the European Stability Mechanism. The department argues that "efficiently distributed social assistance should not be *de facto* prohibited on the grounds of its repercussions on public debt".

Poverty indicators suggest there has been no improvement for Greeks since the beginning of the crisis. The situation became more difficult as the measures taken during the austerity period were fragmented, under-resourced and limited in their scope. For instance, due to a lack of funding available for social housing, the 'Housing Reintegration' programme was only able to support 50 beneficiaries in Athens[106]. An exception was the implementation of the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD)[107] which targeted families, specifically those with a single parent or several children and the homeless. In-kind benefits from FEAD include food packages, ready-made meals, clothing, school items and baby equipment. The

[104] Federal labour and social affairs Ministry, Bundesteilhabegestz http://www.bmas.de/DE/Schwerpunkte/Inklusion/bundesteilhabegesetz.html (last accessed 12 September 2016)
[105] Federal labour and social affairs Ministry, Bildungspaket http://www.bmas.de/DE/Themen/Arbeitsmarkt/Grundsicherung/Leistungen-zur-Sicherung-des-Lebensunterhalts/Bildungspaket/bildungspaket.html (last accessed 12 September 2016)
[106] The programme provides for housing and basic needs, psychosocial support, reintegration into the labour market and follow-up support. This EU-funded programme has been extended until the end of 2016.
[107] European Commission (2015) The Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD). Breaking the vicious circle of poverty and deprivation. http://bookshop.europa.eu/en/the-fund-for-european-aid-to-the-most-deprived-fead--pbKE0115518/ (last accessed 15 September 2016)

programme was perceived as well-targeted, addressing primarily families in extreme poverty, and this form of support was welcomed. However, ESN's Greek contributor recommends that FEAD can be administered through vouchers.

Due to the reduction in ESF funding, community-based programmes such as municipal vegetable gardens, time banks[108] and liaison offices[109] were discontinued. Nonetheless, European funding continues to contribute to the planning and implementation of "positive examples" for new public social services, among them single entry points for integrated services[110] which contribute to the fight against social exclusion. Overall, Athens' Welfare and Equality Department advise that more resources should be focussed on combatting extreme forms of poverty, eg: through programmes such as social groceries, social pharmacies and community centres.

The refugee crisis has revealed the lack of long-term inclusion programmes for migrants. In Athens, in terms of residential services, the 'Eleonas Refugee Camp'[111] was set up for 2,500 refugees, who are hosted under "exemplary conditions", according to the Municipality of Athens. A second programme addresses 3,000 refugees, some of whom are candidates for relocation in the EU. The Municipality of Athens has also joined forces with the UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, to allocate fully equipped flats for up to six tenants each[112].

Measures aiming at the long-term integration of refugees are now in preparation. For example, a recent project proposal for Community Centres[113] plans to include provisions for Greek language lessons for migrant and refugee children.

The ongoing national healthcare reform aims to set up a Network of Primary Health Care Units[114]. Currently in its pilot phase, this reform should ultimately be extended throughout the country. The Social Welfare department of the Municipality of Athens calls for all its municipal clinics to be integrated in the above-mentioned Network. Among other advantages, it will give municipal doctors the possibility to refer cases to hospitals.

[108] Time banks can be defined as a reciprocity-based work trading system in which hours are the currency. With time banking, a person with one skill set can bank and trade hours of work for equal hours of work in another skill set instead of paying or being paid for services.
[109] These offices provide frontline referral services. They are mentioned in Greece's 2016 National Reform Programme, p.51-26. http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/csr2016/nrp2016_greece_en.pdf (last accessed 20 October 2016)
[110] An example of a single entry point in the field of mental health: 'Athina Health' Addiction Prevention and Healthcare Treatment Centre http://www.cityofathens.gr/en/node/7509 (last accessed 15 September 2016). An example from the field of homelessness: City of Athens Homeless Shelter (KYADA): http://www.cityofathens.gr/en/node/7511 (last accessed 15 September 2016)
[111] European Commission (2015) Eleonas, temporary refugees' accommodation centre in Athens http://ec.europa.eu/avservices/photo/photoByMediaGroup.cfm?sitelang=en&mgid=871 (last accessed 15 September 2016)
[112] GTP Headlines (2016) Athens Mayor, UNHCR Join Forces, City to Host 3,000 Refugees. http://news.gtp.gr/2016/03/31/athens-unhcr-host-3000-refugees/ (last accessed 15 September 2016)
[113] Due to the project being at an early stage at the date of this publication, no reference is available.
[114] WHO Europe (2016) The Greek Government launches a broad policy dialogue on primary health care reform http://www.euro.who.int/en/countries/greece/news/news/2016/05/the-greek-government-launches-a-broad-policy-dialogue-on-primary-health-care-reform (last accessed 15 September 2016)

Hungary

Recent reform of the benefits administration is likely to impact on poverty and social exclusion. To make them more uniform, Hungary has shifted the administration of benefits from the municipality to the district level ('járás' – NUTS 2), managed by the state administration. According to the Association of Social Professions (3sz), the reform could ultimately have two opposing effects: benefits could become less accessible, especially for those in rural areas who cannot travel to the district administration, or more inclusive, by entrusting needs' assessment and benefits' granting to impartial district administrative agents.

3sz broadly agrees with the European Commission's country report on the fact that "the recent reforms do not expand the eligibility to or generosity of social benefits[115]". There is no evidence that municipalities have could compensate for the loss of state funding for services, especially in the field of prevention. Informal feedback[116] has also reported an increased use of high-interest loans and microcredits by people with lower to medium income and consequently, cases of indebtedness and evictions. Previously, these groups of citizens were effectively protected by housing benefits, which although as low as HUF 5000 per month (ca. EUR 16), were cut[117].

No positive changes have been recorded in regards to Public Work Schemes (PWS)[118]. PWS are still characterised by low productivity and a low number of participants transitioning to regular jobs. Participation in PWS has increased as benefit recipients are requested to participate in PWS to be able to access benefits. People refusing to participate in PWS may lose their benefits altogether.

EU funds are rather ill-perceived by the public due to corruption scandals. Some are currently investigated by the European anti-fraud office (OLAF) as well as documented in the media[119]. They are associated with a lack of open, competitive processes on calls for tenders.

However, 3sz points to a few good examples on the use of EU funds, such as work-led rehabilitation programmes for people with disabilities[120]. This project has yielded good results in terms of enhancing independent living and finding jobs for 10,000 people with disabilities. However, 3sz fears that such projects may not be continued at local level because of their high costs and lack of local authorities' funding.

3sz recommends that EU funding is accompanied by a firm commitment from the state to pursue successful projects beyond the EU financing period.

Early childhood education and childcare (ECEC) has changed dramatically since the communist era. Quality and coverage have increased. Although the system's quality has improved, the number of places is still low. Instead of improving coverage, the government has invested in generous parental leave and cash benefits, which has negatively impacted female employment and young mothers' mental health[121]. 3sz also notes that the availability of ECEC, although an important

[115] European Commission (2016) Country report – Hungary (p.45).
[116] This feedback consists of case studies in Hungarian. There does not seem to be any official statistics or data on these issues.
[117] European Commission (2016) Country report – Hungary (p.45).
[118] European Social Network (2015) Looking ahead: Local public social services priorities for the European Semester 2016. Available at: http://www.esn-eu.org/news/727/index.html
[119] Népszabadság (2016) 'Floriant Farkas summoned by the European anti-fraud office – but he has not left'. This article was originally published by the left-leaning online newspaper Népszabadság, whose publication has been since then suspended by Mediaworks Hungary.
[120] In Hungarian: TÁMOP 1.1.1-12/1 - Megváltozott munkaképességű emberek rehabilitációjának és foglalkoztatásának elősegítése [Rehabilitation and employment of people with disabilities]. The project helped 10,000 persons with disabilities with job-seeking, and found job placements for more than 5,000, by subsidising training, improving working environments and employing personal assistants and other professionals at workplaces.
[121] Qualitative social work research has been carried out on the psychological consequences of long-term isolation and maternity leaves. This has been called the 'GYES-Syndrome'. See more at: http://dreros.hazipatika.net/pub_3.pdf (last accessed 20 October 2016)

element, will not replace labour demand – an essential factor to bring women (back) into the labour market.

Once at school, segregation and participation in 'special schools' (notably for Roma children) is still an issue, in particular in areas with higher concentration of Roma children. More importantly, 3sz stresses the need to address the gaps between schools. Although the Hungarian education system is described as rather homogenous in the OECD's PISA studies, the difference between advantaged and disadvantaged schools is one of the highest in Europe[122]. The expansion of the so-called 'Social work at school' programme could help to reduce these social gaps.

The transition from large institutions to foster and family care has been a positive development. However, 3sz warns that low levels of foster parents' training and fostering management could strongly impact performance. Foster parents are paid, but they are not equipped to deal with highly complex situations such as drug abuse. 3sz worries that little is being done to encourage the child's return to their biological family, making fostering in Hungary permanent rather than temporary.

[122] OECD (2012) PISA in Hungary http://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/hungary-pisa.htm (last accessed 20 October 2016)

Ireland

The crisis and austerity measures have had a severe impact on social services. Irish contributors[123] do not agree with the statement provided by the European Commission's country report that "the welfare system worked well to contain the effects of the crisis on poverty and inequality[124]". In Ireland, recipients of almost all categories of welfare benefits suffered direct cuts to their entitlements; for instance, youth jobseeker's assistance payments experienced cuts of between 25% and 50%[125]. Disability Allowance and Jobseekers allowance each account for EUR 188 per week[126], whilst to have an income above the poverty level a person needs to have a weekly disposable income of at least EUR 218[127].

Immigrants face higher levels of deprivation, especially those families with parents from Africa or from the EU Accession States. In 2015, 71% of households with one or both parents from Africa struggled financially compared with 42% of Irish households[128]. Almost one in five children live in households with income below the poverty line (60% of the median income). Overall children represent one-quarter of Ireland's poor[129].

Questions have been raised regarding the suitability of employment as an answer to poverty,[130] since almost 20% of adults who have an income below the poverty line are in employment[131]. When it comes to accessing the labour market, the most disadvantaged groups are the long-term unemployed, refugees, and people with disabilities. From a total of 17 potential resources to integrate the beneficiaries of international protection into the labour market, only three are available to UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) programme refugees: language courses, orientation courses and access to housing[132].

It is too early to assess the effectiveness of the Youth Guarantee as a response to youth unemployment. The Youth Guarantee was piloted in Ballymun, a suburb of Dublin. A 2014 report[133] concluded that it was not possible to determine if there was a long term positive impact on participants' individual circumstances and on unemployment rates in general. Despite rather positive feedback so far, resource constraints mean that the programme can be implemented only in a limited fashion. Separately, it has been noted that the Youth Guarantee makes no specific reference to NEETs[134].

Ireland needs a brave response to address increasing homelessness. The routes into homelessness have diversified in recent years. For example, an increasing number of households are unable to keep up with mortgage payments and increasing rents, and it seems that the majority of families on first presentation in homeless services do not appear to experience the 'range of psycho-

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[123] Terry Madden, independent consultant, Dr. Mairead Finn, independent consultant, and Aideen McDonnell, senior mental health social worker.
[124] European Commission (2016) Country report – Ireland (p.3)
[125] Hardiman and MacCarthaigh (2013: 26)
[126] Social Justice Ireland (2016)
[127] Social Justice Ireland (2016)
[128] Trinity College Dublin (February 2015) 'New Irish Families' Newsletter 4: Poverty and Deprivation among migrant families https://www.tcd.ie/merc/publications/New%20Irish%20Families%20-%20Newsletter%204.pdf (last accessed 20 October 2016)
[129] Social Justice Ireland (2016: 1)
[130] The Economic and Social research Institute (2016) Low Pay, Minimum Wages and Household Incomes: Evidence for Ireland https://www.esri.ie/publications/low-pay-minimum-wages-and-household-incomes-evidence-for-ireland/ (last accessed 20 October 2016)
[131] Social Justice Ireland (2016: 1)
[132] Gusciute, Arnold and Quinn (2016) Integration of Beneficiaries of International Protection into the Labour Market: policies and practices in Ireland https://www.esri.ie/publications/integration-of-beneficiaries-of-international-protection-into-the-labour-market-policies-and-practices-in-ireland/ (last accessed 20 October 2016)
[133] Department of Social Protection (2015) Key Learning from the Ballymun Youth Guarantee Project https://www.welfare.ie/en/downloads/Key-Learning-Ballymun-Youth-Guarantee-Project.pdf (last accessed 20 October 2016)
[134] Kelly and McGuinness (2015) Impact of the Great Recession on unemployed and NEET individuals' labour market transitions in Ireland http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0939362514000971 (last accessed 20 October 2016)

social problems which are typically associated with homelessness'[135].

Already flagged as problematic in ESN's 2015 European Semester report, the rate of family homelessness in Ireland has doubled from 2015 to 2016.[136] The situation in Dublin is particularly dire. Seventy percent of individuals who are homeless in Ireland live in Dublin[137], a total of 677 families[138]. In January 2015, there were 865 children living in emergency accommodation. This number had doubled to 1,638 by January 2016[139].

Some efforts to improve the situation have been noted regarding access to rented housing for low-income households. Restrictions to prevent landlords increasing rents have been introduced, in addition to greater rent subsidies being made available. However, the contributors fear that subsidising rents may result in rents increases, meaning that poor families are still unable to afford a home. Although it is forbidden to discriminate against those who receive rent subsidies, the practice continues, with anecdotal evidence of requests for employer references as proxies for identifying those in receipt of rent subsidies.

Further community services are needed to prevent unnecessary hospital stays. The lack of suitable accommodation has increased pressure on other health and social services. This is illustrated by lengthy delays in discharges from acute mental health units, with a sizeable number of people staying in hospital beds long past any clinical requirement to do so[140]. In some cases, due to a lack of alternative options, service users are discharged into emergency homeless accommodation[141].

Staff shortages in the mental health service remain a significant issue. The NGO Mental Health Reform believes that these shortages are resulting in lengthy waiting lists including lists for access to health and social care professionals in community mental health teams[142].

On a positive note, measures have been initiated to enhance service user and family involvement such as the recruitment of Heads of Service User Engagement in each of the 31 Irish community services.

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[135] Focus Ireland (2016) What do we know about the children and families living in Dublin's emergency homeless accommodation? https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Insight-into-Family-Homleessness-No-1-2016-Snapshot-Profile-of-Children-residing-in-Emergency-Accommodation-in-Dublin-Region.pdf (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[136] The Irish Times (2016) Record number of Dublin families became homeless in January http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/record-number-of-dublin-families-became-homeless-in-january-1.2544182 (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[137] Houses of the Oireachtas (2016) Report of the Committee on Housing and Homelessness http://www.oireachtas.ie/parliament/media/committees/32housingandhomelessness/Final-Report-.pdf (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[138] Focus Ireland (2016) op.cit.

[139] Barnardos (2016) The Hidden Housing Crisis https://www.barnardos.ie/assets/files/pdf/Hidden-Housing-Crisis-2016.pdf (last accessed 20 October 2016); Focus Ireland (2016) op.cit.

[140] Study to be published.

[141] Tallaght Hospital (on Dublin's South Side) has provided figures showing that every 9.4 days, someone is discharged from their acute mental health unit into homelessness (Mental Health Reform, 2015:10).

[142] Mental Health Reform (2015) Mental Health Reform promotes improved and prioritised mental health services in Ireland https://www.mentalhealthreform.ie/ (last accessed 20 October 2016)

Italy

Major disparities in municipalities' resources continue to affect the quality and distribution of services. The unequal availability and quality of social services in Italy is a major problem, says the General Directorate for Social Policy of the Lazio Region. Regions in Northern and Central Italy have significantly more resources to finance services. Moreover, some regions have a more efficient approach to planning, organising, delivering and evaluating services. The Lazio Region has been working on improving the impact of the resources spent in the territory through major structural changes, including the introduction of participatory planning, social impact evaluation of services, and integration of health and social policies.

A new active inclusion programme has started to be implemented. The Support for Active Inclusion or SIA programme (Sostegno per l'Inclusione Attiva)[143], which was first piloted in large metropolitan areas in 2013-2014, is now being rolled out across the country. It makes a monthly social benefits payment conditional on recipients being in training or actively searching for a job. The National Institute for Social Security (INPS), regions and municipalities are responsible for the governance of this programme, especially the implementation of active inclusion measures. INPS delivers cash benefits to families, while municipalities are responsible for coordinating training, work placements and employment, ie the active inclusion component, financed through the European Social Fund.

The Lazio Region expects this programme to help reduce poverty. However, it also points out that the new tasks will pose some challenges to municipalities during the transition period, particularly given that there are not enough resources to implement the programme to cover everyone who would be eligible.

The Jobs Act[144], approved in 2014, is yet to be fully implemented. As the European Commission's country report explains, it is a fundamental reform aiming to reduce the duality of the labour market[145], promote open-ended recruitment and favour labour reallocation. It also aims to make the Italian labour market more flexible and to introduce more comprehensive unemployment benefits and assistance. Lazio says that they have not seen a significant impact from the Jobs Act yet but expect to see changes once the Act has been fully implemented.

The Youth Guarantee has had mixed results. The European Commission's country report points out that in 2014 Italy still had one of the highest rates of NEET in the EU (22%) for those aged 15 to 24, mainly due to the lack of vacancies and job offers available. According to Lazio, the Youth Guarantee has only reached about 55% of NEETs, with significant differences between regions. In the Lazio Region, only 51% of the planned resources have been used. Overall, the figure for Italy is 70%[146]. Moreover, there have been delays in the payment of benefits to young people in the programme, for which the INPS is responsible. This has added to young people's dissatisfaction with the programme.

Managed at the national level, long-term care services are unsatisfactory. The European Commission describes the lack of long-term care services and the reliance on cash benefits accurately. Because these cash benefits are managed at national level whilst services are planned by the regions and managed by the municipalities, the Lazio Region claims that it is nearly impossible to reform the system. The reform would require shifting resources from the national level to the regional or local level. The recent budget cuts

[143] Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, Sostegno per l'inclusion attiva (SIA) http://www.lavoro.gov.it/temi-e-priorita/poverta-ed-esclusione-sociale/focus-on/Sostegno-per-inclusione-attiva-SIA/Pagine/default.aspx (last accessed 15 September 2016)
[144] Italian Government, Law No. 183 of 2014
[145] A dual labour market is divided between the so called "insiders" who are mainly characterized by high incomes, job security, and normally good prospects for upward mobility; and the "outsiders", who are especially typified by low incomes, little job security, and little training.
[146] Source: Lazio Region. See also European Commission (2016), Youth Guarantee country by country – Italy. Available at http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1161&intPageId=3340&langId=en (last accessed 15 September 2016)

to regions and municipalities mean that there are no additional financial resources to invest in the development of long-term care services, leaving care responsibilities to families.

Italy was at the forefront of the recent migration crisis. In 2015, 115,000 migrants entered Italy. This number rose to 180,000 by October 2016, including 20,000 unaccompanied children. On 6 October 2016, 10,700 people were rescued from the sea.

About 70% of asylum requests are currently granted. The situation for the remaining 30% depends heavily on bilateral agreements between Italy and origin countries.

Systems in place to receive migrants include[147]:

- Four 'hotspots' for immediate identification (Lampedusa, Pozzallo, Trapani, Taranto)[148];
- Around 6,000 emergency reception centres (CAS) for around 125,000 people;
- The Protection System for Asylum-seekers and Refugees (SPRAR) which provided integrated support, housing and employment counselling to 21,613 people in 2015;
- The child protection system oversees unaccompanied children aged 14 to 18, who are usually hosted in 'Children's houses', and sometimes in families.

Future steps include decreasing the number of CAS, whose concentration on certain territories has created tensions with local communities. The Lazio Region argues that when integrating migrants, the focus should be on universal, mainstream policies and services rather than targeted ones. One of the government's objectives is also to involve migrants in traineeships and/or employment right from their arrival, instead of waiting for their status to be confirmed. Currently run on a voluntary basis by 2,500 municipalities out of 8,000, the SPRAR could be made compulsory and extended to all 8,000 Italian local authorities[149].

[147] See: 'Reception and Integration: the role of small and medium cities', National Conference of the European Migration Network and National Contact Points, Rome, 6-7 October 2016 at: http://www.consorzioagora.it/public/file/EMN_Conferenza_Abstract_Poster_Def_.pdf (last accessed 15 September 2016)

[148] See European Commission, 'The hotspot approach to managing exceptional migratory flows', available at: http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/background-information/docs/2_hotspots_en.pdf (last accessed 15 September 2016)

[149] See: Ministry of Interior and the National Association of Italian Communes (ANCI), Annual SPRAR report (2015) (ANCI, Ministero dell'Interno, Rapporto annuale SPRAR. Sistema di protezione per richiedenti asilo e rifugiati, Atlante SPRAR 2015).

Latvia

The Municipal Finance Equalisation mechanism represents a transparent and useful tool to mitigate the significant differences between municipalities' income levels. Created in 1998 and organised by the State treasury, the Fund consists of a state budget grant and municipality payments, for a total of EUR 156.82 million. The amount of payments and financial transfers to each municipality are calculated according to a specific formula. As a result, there are three types of municipalities: 1) donors (those municipalities which only make payments into the fund); 2) receivers (those municipalities which only benefit from the fund) and 3) neutrals (those municipalities which neither make payments nor benefit from the fund)[150].

Progress has been recorded in terms of deinstitutionalisation. The number of children in institutional care[151] has decreased**.** In Riga, deinstitutionalisation is being used as an opportunity to change the structure of residential services for children. This involves systematically reducing the number of children in each institution, creating smaller units with a more family home-like feeling, and involving children in a more person-centred way in services (eg: in decision-making or household duties).

The rights and responsibilities of local authorities in the deinstitutionalisation process[152] have been clarified, especially regarding public financing and applying for residential services. However, questions regarding adequate access to mental health care and supported employment for people with disabilities or mental health problems remain unresolved. Although, in 2015, the Municipality of Riga signed a preliminary agreement with the regional authority to advance deinstitutionalisation of these population groups.

Activities are taking place to improve capacity building in local social services. The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) and the Latvian Ministry of Welfare agreed the training of 40 local social workers on the use of the 'Support Intensity Scale' (SIS)[153]. SIS will be used to assess people's needs in terms of residential services, people in long-term care with mental health problems and children with disabilities. This capacity-building programme will receive considerable financial support from European Structural funds.

The implementation of the Guaranteed Minimum Income (GMI)[154] is decentralised, leaving local authorities with the discretion to decide on a higher local GMI. At national level, GMI has been set at EUR 49.80 per person per month. In Riga, it is EUR 56.91 per month (EUR 128.06 for public pension recipients).

Recent changes in children's services include the cancellation of vouchers for childminding services for children aged between one and a half and three years. Using vouchers, the Latvian Government had attempted to promote declared work, the return of parents to work and the provision of quality childcare to parents who cannot find a place in public childcare centres[155]. It is now up to local authorities to continue to provide such arrangements. Local authorities have

[150] The calculation formula takes into account criteria such as the number of all residents, children below 6, children between 7 and 18, and older retired people who receive a pension. http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/decentralisation-and-regional-local-government-administration-latvia_en (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[151] National Statistics Office (n. d.) Population and Social Processes http://data.csb.gov.lv/pxweb/en/Sociala/?rxid=5fb4e222-78f0-49ba-a86c-1304a57a2307 (last accessed 13 September 2016)

[152] Overview on deinstitutionalisation policy in Latvia: Ministry of Welfare (2015) Deinstitutionalization in Latvia: several principles of policy making http://www.lm.gov.lv/upload/prezentacija2/p1_lm_-_danute_jasjko.pdf (last accessed 14 September 2016)

[153] American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (2008) Supports Intensity Scale™ Information https://aaidd.org/docs/default-source/sis-docs/latestsispresentation.pdf?sfvrsn=2 (last accessed 13 September 2016)

[154] European Social Policy Network (2015) Thematic Report on minimum income schemes Latvia 2015. http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=15162&langId=en (last accessed 14 September 2016)

[155] European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (2013) Learning Exchange between Greece and Latvia on 'Service Voucher Systems', p. 4. http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=11053&langId=en (last accessed 13 September 2016)

responded in different ways to this. In Riga, the welfare department of the municipality co-finances the monthly costs of alternative childcare support for 1,065 children that is provided by 569 childminders. Other local authorities, such as Jelgava, have ceased financial support for childminding arrangements.

The long-term unemployed and people with disabilities or mental health problems face persistent employment problems. Given their complex needs, an integrated approach should be adopted, including psychosocial assistance and targeted and health-related support. These groups are currently supported by the State Employment Agency (SEA)[156] through measures such as wage subsidies, informal education and vocational training leading to a qualification. However, ESN's Latvian contributor points to a few caveats regarding their targeting and long-term effectiveness. First, only a small number of long-term unemployed and people with disabilities have benefitted from these measures (*see table below*). Second, no statistics or data have been gathered to assess whether beneficiaries have secured a long-term job placement with these measures, especially those involving informal education. Finally, and perhaps more importantly, these measures tend to overlook the complex problems (addictions, psychosocial difficulties, behavioural disorders, low self-esteem, lack of social skills) and needs of these cohorts. These population groups need additional, coordinated support before entering the labour market. In addition, existing support is fragmented between various providers.

Social services in Riga have managed to partly compensate for this lack of integrated support by providing, for instance, targeted psychosocial support for 30 long-term unemployed people each year.

Measures targeting NEETs have been criticised for the low involvement of municipalities, delays in implementation, and a lack of coordination between ministries. The Youth Guarantee seems to be an exception, as it has involved local social services to a certain extent. However, more could be done to reach out to vulnerable youth, eg: by involving social services to identify and motivate disengaged young people.

Table: Long-term unemployed and people with disabilities supported by the SEA in Riga between January and September 2016

Group	Long-term unemployed	People with disabilities
Total number of people registered with SEA (Sept. 2016)	1,835	1,295
Received targeted wage subsidies (Jan-Sept. 2016)	62	50
Entered education leading to a qualification	118	73
Enrolled in informal education	574	256
Total of individuals receiving support from SEA	754	379
Percentage of individuals receiving support from SEA	41%	29.3%

Source: State Employment Agency, Riga branch

[156] Latvian State Employment Agency (n.d.) http://www.nva.gov.lv/ (in Latvian) (last accessed 20 October 2016)

Lithuania

There should be an assessment of stricter eligibility criteria on social inclusion. The reform to decentralise the management of the cash social assistance scheme has made social assistance more targeted and flexible. It has also increased the incentive for unemployed people to find legal work.

Justinas Sadauskas from the Institute of Education Sciences and Social Work at Mykolas Romeris University recommends undertaking research on how the stricter regulation of cash social assistance impacts on people's risk of poverty or social exclusion and labour market participation. This is particularly the case for the reduced number of recipients and the low level of social assistance (EUR 102 per month). Mr Sadauskas also recommends that the benefit and minimum income systems should better account for increases in consumer prices and average wages.

One positive aspect of the reform is that decision-making on social benefits has become the responsibility of municipalities which are much closer to their citizens and better placed to understand and consider local circumstances and opportunities.

In every municipality, social workers support socially excluded people, including families at risk. In the past year, this form of support has become more integrated and personalised. Four ministries[157] approved new provisions on joint working with families[158]. This attempt to create a holistic support system for families is rated positively by the Lithuanian member of ESN's Reference Group.

More than 14,000 people are currently on the waiting lists for social housing. Despite pressing demand, it is not clear how municipalities will fund additional social housing, and what form this will take (new buildings, purchase of existing buildings)[159].

There is a lack of flexibility at local level in support for the unemployed. Labour exchange agencies are responsible for supporting people to (re-)gain employment. Mr Sadauskas highlights that the system is often bureaucratic, not flexible enough to support people individually and there is a lack of planning regarding the workforce and local needs. For instance, sometimes specific training programmes are offered and implemented in regions that do not have a need for that specific profession. There is a lack of flexibility in planning educational and training courses for unemployed people at the local level because municipalities and local employers are not sufficiently involved in the process. Moreover, many unemployed people only receive group support, but individual advice would often be more effective.

Lithuania has started to implement the 2014-2017 strategy for the transition from institutions to community-based social services for children in care. However, implementation is hindered by poor management in the reorganisation process. Care workers in institutions are uncertain about their professional future, which affects their daily work. The needs of children currently in institutions are being evaluated and the qualifications of care workers revisited. The next step will be the development of a service infrastructure at regional level and the provision of new services for the target group, including foster care between 2017 and 2020. However, deinstitutionalisation has so far mainly meant that children in care are relocated to smaller facilities where smaller groups of children live with their care workers.

To ensure that children are properly supported and safeguarded, the deinstitutionalisation process must be accompanied by preventive work with vulnerable families. It also needs the establishment of alternative support services,

[157] Social Security and Labour; Education and Science; Interior; Health.
[158] Lithuanian legislation register https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/3ad912404d9111e6b72ff16034f7f796 (last accessed 20 October 2016)
[159] Lithuanian ministry of social security and labour (2016) Savivaldybės neturi planų kaip rūpintis socialiniu būstu [Municipalities have no plans to take care of social housing] http://www.socmin.lt/lt/naujienos/pranesimai-spaudai/p30/savivaldybes-neturi-planu-puhx.html (last accessed 20 October 2016)

an adequate legal framework, clear action plans to be implemented in the different regions and clear funding mechanisms and resources.

Lithuania still lacks a holistic active ageing strategy. The Ministry of Health's 2014 Active Ageing Plan[160] set out a strategy on access and on quality of healthcare for older people. However, it failed to take sufficiently into consideration other aspects of active ageing, such as labour market participation, income security, social participation, housing and life-long learning.

Promoting youth employment has been a focus of Structural Funds. As such, the 'Promotion of youth employment and motivation' initiative was launched in 2014. Its objective is to integrate socially vulnerable young people into the labour market or formal education system by developing their personal, social and professional competencies. It therefore creates the necessary conditions for them to be involved in social and professional activities or voluntary work. Participants can attend lectures and discussions on how to choose a profession, the social environment, labour market needs and how they perceive their own abilities. In addition, participants can learn more about self-awareness, communication psychology, body language, coping with stress, leadership, developing personal and social competences, and enhancing self-confidence.

Various projects were set up thanks to the European Social Fund. The 'Voluntary Youth Service' and the 'Trust Yourself' project were both managed by the Ministry of Social Security and Labour, for a total of EUR 1.158 million. Preliminary results are positive in regards to the number of young people who completed the project, found voluntary placements and gained new skills. However, neither of the two programmes target vulnerable young people. Moreover, the project evaluation did not show how many participants were active in the labour market after 6 to 12 months and what kind of employment they have found.

The sustainability of EU-funded social projects is a source of concern, given that projects which provided community care services for people with disabilities and mental health could be discontinued when EU funding ends. At the end of 2015, all municipalities committed with the Ministry of Social Security and Labour to fund integrated support services until funding from EU projects was received. It remains to be seen whether this commitment will result in concrete action. Legislative, financial and structural frameworks for these services are required to ensure that they become sustainable.

[160] Lithuanian legislation register https://www.e-tar.lt/portal/lt/legalAct/85fb0c200d7311e4adf3c8c5d7681e73 (last accessed 20 October 2016)

The Netherlands

Decentralisation and budget cuts have led to a major transformation in the social services landscape. A major challenge for social services in the Netherlands, the recent decentralisation process was hardly touched upon by the 2016 European Commission's country report. Municipalities had to revise existing contracts with service providers, a number of which went bankrupt, or had to make employees redundant, including large providers such as TSN[161]. The National Association of Local Governments for Social Welfare (LCGW) notes that although most employees have found other jobs[162], these were less well paid than before, and with worse working conditions (part-time or freelance work). This situation resulted in uncertainty for service users, especially in the field of home care services.

Municipalities have had to compensate for budget cuts (between 20% and 30%) made by the national government. While the vast majority of social services became the municipalities' responsibility, the municipalities have very little room for manoeuvre when it comes to increasing their budgets. LCGW therefore recommends that the next step of the decentralisation reform addresses financial issues and increases local governments' power over local budgets.

Bureaucracy seems to have a negative impact on social services performance. As discussed last year[163], LCGW worries that too much bureaucracy and valuable administration time is spent on procedures and checking on people on benefits, rather than on providing actual support and creating positive conditions for (social) innovation. LCGW therefore calls for innovative thinking and solutions. In the municipality of Groningen, a pilot was started to test out a universal basic income scheme. It is seen by LCGW as a flexible, cost-efficient way to promote people's involvement in their communities in varied ways. ESN's Dutch contributor also suggests a stop to housing subsidies, which are said to drive rents up. Budget savings could supplement the above-mentioned universal income.

Although the Netherlands performs well in terms of employment and low poverty rates, LCGW points to vulnerable, marginal groups that should be given attention and receive appropriate support. They are, among others, people in a situation of indebtedness, the long-term unemployed, and people with a migrant background. LCGW is worried that the system is creating a "lost generation" marked by stigmatisation, discrimination and poor integration into society and the labour market, with a potentially very high "social cost".

LCGW warns about the conditions in which migrants are received and supported. The situation is particularly difficult when migrants are waiting for their asylum request to be processed. Several remote reception centres have been set up, far from local communities. Language courses are not provided and migrants' integration into the community and the labour market is not catered for. LGCW calls on the government to process Dutch citizens' requests to welcome refugees in their homes[164][165], and to provide appropriate community-based support to newly arrived migrants and asylum seekers.

A lack of affordable housing is a source of major concern. Acquiring a property is challenging for people living on modest

[161] TSN ThuisZorg ['Homecare] was the Netherlands' biggest home care agency, employing 12,000 workers for 40,000 clients http://www.dutchnews.nl/news/archives/2016/03/86950-2/ (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[162] 'Buurtzorg takes at least 3350 employees from TSN Thuiszorg' http://www.togetherabroad.nl/blogs/3/3txja0-buurtzorg-takes-at-least-3350-employees-from-tsn-thuiszorg- (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[163]European Social Network (2015) Looking ahead: Local public social services priorities for the European Semester 2016 Available at: http://www.esn-eu.org/news/727/index.html

[164] For instance, Gastgezin voor een Vluchteling [Host families for refugees] is an association that was set up in September 2016 to support refugees at community level http://www.gastgezinvoorvluchteling.nl/ (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[165] 'Steeds meer Nederlanders vangen thuis vluchteling op' [Increasing numbers of Dutch people welcome refugees in their homes], in *De Volksrant*, 14.04.2015 http://www.volkskrant.nl/binnenland/steeds-meer-nederlanders-vangen-thuis-vluchteling-op~a3952976/ (last accessed 20 October 2016)

incomes. There is evidence that people with rising income do not automatically give up their social housing. Equally, it is difficult for potential new beneficiaries to access social housing due to the lack of available properties. There is a need for assurance that social housing goes to people with low income, while those who do not qualify but are on low incomes are supported in finding homes. In the municipality of Brummen, a housing cooperative was set up to support former tenants to become owners, eg: by granting them a loan that was previously rejected by the banks. Housing associations have reported positive outcomes, increased social diversity in communities, as well as increased available funding to build new houses.

Poland

Benefit changes have impacted on poverty and exclusion. The European Commission's country report highlights that partly due to the low level of social benefits, there has been an increase in extreme poverty and underperformance of the social protection system to reduce poverty. The Polish Institute for the Development of Social Services (IRSS) explains that the government has increased some social benefits, but it is too early to see how effective these will be in reducing poverty.

A new maternal benefit of approximately EUR 230 per month for one year was introduced on 1 January 2016 for mothers who are not entitled to maternity allowance, such as unemployed women, students, farmers and those employed on the basis of civil contracts. As highlighted in the Commission's country report for Poland, the high number of civil contracts, which are temporary employment contracts, has remained stable. IRSS agrees that this type of contract rarely leads to permanent employment, has a negative impact on productivity, and excludes employees from training, in-work development and job security.

While the Act on state aid for raising children[166] provides a monthly childcare benefit of approximately EUR 115 per child under 18 years of age, a new benefit for families called Rodzina 500 plus[167] has been introduced to further support families and their children. The Family 500 plus programme, introduced on 1 April 2016, consists of a monthly allowance of 500 Polish zloty (approximately EUR 116), which is provided for the second and any subsequent child in the family. The benefit is also available for the first child, if the family income per person is below EUR 184 or EUR 276 and the child has a disability. These benefits are intended to reduce child poverty, especially in families with more than one child. However, one of the main criticism is the negative impact that this measure may have on maternal employment. Moreover, it feels as if this measure does not belong to a comprehensive package of measures for children and families and other measures go in the wrong direction. For example, the government decided to abolish the free preschool year and to raise the age of compulsory schooling to seven.

Long-term care is still mostly provided informally by family members, predominantly women. Whilst the nursing benefit for those caring for a family member increased on 1 January 2016 from approximately EUR 120 to EUR 300 per month (except for carers of people with disabilities for whom it has remained at EUR 120), little progress has been made on expanding community care services. However, the national government has given local authorities the opportunity to invest in day care centres for older people through the WIGOR programme[168]. This programme for

[166] Act of 11 February 2016 on state aid for raising children. Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej (2016) O pomocy państwa w wychowywaniu dzieci z projektami aktów wykonawczych https://www.senat.gov.pl/download/gfx/senat/pl/senatposiedzeniatematy/2956/drukisejmowe/216.pdf (last accessed 12 September 2016)

[167] Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, Rodzina 500 plus http://www.mpips.gov.pl/wsparcie-dla-rodzin-z-dziecmi/rodzina-500-plus/ (last accessed 12 September 2016)

[168] Chancellery of the Prime Minister (2015) Government will support local governments in construction of Senior-

competitive tenders subsidises the development and adaptation of day care centres for older people to create spaces where older people have access to recreational activities and care.

EU funds support a number of social inclusion projects. The Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy has used EU Funds to implement new standards and guidelines for services for homeless people. Between 2009 and 2014, five municipalities (Gdańsk, Nowe Miasto, Poznań i Przemyśl) participated in the project in partnership with local NGOs[169].

The European Social Fund was also used to develop 480 social integration centres (CIS) and social integration clubs (KIS). They provide activities and support for people at risk of social exclusion, including people who are unemployed, homeless people, those who suffer from substance misuse, people leaving state care, prisons or other institutional settings, or those with no fixed income.

Supporting people to re-enter the labour market is a key focus of the integration centres and 78% of CIS service users and 30% of KIS service users have achieved re-employment[170]. Collaboration between social assistance institutions, reintegration entities and employment services has improved and there are many local and regional partnerships and platforms (networks) for collaboration, for example in Wielkopolska, Lubeskie, Zachodnioporskie and Pomorskie.

The third example of the use of EU funds to promote social inclusion highlighted by IRSS is the transformation of support services for unemployed people through new activation and integration programmes, such as supported work and community work. The unemployed for whom work cannot be found easily, receive support from welfare centres in the form of education, training and retraining.

Wigor centres https://www.premier.gov.pl/en/news/news/government-will-support-local-governments-in-construction-of-senior-wigor-centres.html (last accessed 12 September 2016)

[169] On 'municipal standards for getting out of homelessness', see Pomeranian Forum of Support to get out of homelessness http://www.pfwb.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/opis-projektu-SWP.pdf and Human Resources Development Centre https://www.crzl.gov.pl/images/01-Biblioteka/Publikacje/Projekty_Pomocy_Spolecznej/Tworzenie_i_rozwijanie_standardow/Podrecznik_Model_GSWB.pdf (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[170] Polish Parliament (2012) http://orka.sejm.gov.pl/Druki7ka.nsf/0/C65DF90F3977D830C1257A69004F7274/$File/679.pdf and Polish Parliament (2014) http://orka.sejm.gov.pl/Druki7ka.nsf/0/3F95DC865011DBE2C1257DCD002ED013/%24File/3065.pdf (last accessed 20 October 2016)

Portugal

Major changes have affected public social services in Portugal. Decentralisation and stronger involvement of local authorities is still on the agenda. Pilot projects are taking place to test the implementation of the decentralisation law and the delegation of responsibilities for public health and healthcare services to local authorities and supra-municipal entities[171]. Decentralisation has taken place with limited public investment in social services, which has prevented the reduction of regional disparities in terms of service provision and access.

Relationships between non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and public authorities have changed. The lack of commonly agreed values and culture, as well as the loose regulation of these transfers of responsibilities, may jeopardise the equal distribution and provision of services across the country. Recent government priorities include a focus on the provision of basic social services delivered through new partnerships. The state has contracted and funded NGOs to deliver services that were previously delivered by public social services. These new arrangements and transfers must be monitored to ensure the stability of, access to and territorial coverage of services, especially for people with complex and multiple needs.

Positive measures for vulnerable groups have been observed. The coverage and amount of the Solidarity Supplement for older people and the Child allowance were improved, and a salary supplement was introduced for low-income households. Although these measures are useful and targeted at those in need, the Portuguese Association of Social Workers (APSS) recommends they should be part of an integrated strategy that guarantees basic standards of welfare. This idea had already been brought up as early as 1992 by the European Union in its Recommendation on Sufficient resources and assistance[172].

The eligibility criteria of the Minimum Income Scheme (MIS) were changed, which reduced the number of beneficiaries and the benefits provided. The MIS became linked with activation measures, imposing a stricter conditionality on beneficiaries[173]. The new government has raised the amount of the minimum income, which is necessary to fulfil its “major role in combatting severe poverty” and covering basic needs, according to APSS[174]. APSS warns about the importance given to “philanthropist” measures to mitigate poverty, which ignore the encouragement of autonomy, self-esteem and confidence of beneficiaries.

In the context of a slow economic recovery, unemployment has been reported to be a major social problem[175]. Measures offered to the unemployed are primarily geared towards job opportunities and training. Many households are affected by both unemployment and poverty; thus, investment should not solely be targeted towards activation, but also address material deprivation and social exclusion stemming from poverty. Investment would need to be directed to the establishment of integrated services for individual users, but also to increasing inter-sectoral cooperation. Investment should be used to create sustainable forms of employment, unlike

[171] See also CEMR (2013) Decentralisation at a crossroads - Territorial reforms in Europe in times of crisis, p. 49. http://ccre.org/img/uploads/piecesjointe/filename/CCRE_broch_EN_complete_low.pdf (last accessed 1 November 2016)

[172] Council recommendation http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=URISERV%3Ac10609 (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[173] For a discussion on the ambiguous role of activation policies: Pedro Hespanha (n. d.) The activation trend in the Portuguese social policy http://www.ces.uc.pt/publicacoes/oficina/ficheiros/225.pdf (last accessed 19 September 2016)

[174] OECD (2015) Reducing inequality and poverty in Portugal, *Economics Department Working Papers No. 1258*, pp. 16-17. http://www.oecd.org/officialdocuments/publicdisplaydocumentpdf/?cote=ECO/WKP(2015)76&docLanguage=En (last accessed 19 September 2016)

[175] International Labor Organization (2014) Tackling the jobs crisis in Portugal. http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_228208.pdf (last accessed 19 September 2016)

publicly subsidised employment, where users are reliant on benefits for a longer period.

The Youth Guarantee has provided a range of measures for unemployed youth and NEETs[176], including measures involving social services and awareness-raising. Given the breadth of the Youth Guarantee framework, APSS recommends paying close attention to the effective coordination of the various stakeholders within this framework.

Deinstitutionalisation has been on the agenda for almost two decades. However, this process has been delayed by lack of resources and the late development of the social welfare system. There could be new impetus with the recent appointment of a State Secretary for the Inclusion of People with Disabilities[177]. They will be tasked, among others, with developing opportunities for people with disabilities on the labour market (such as professional placements and access to training) and community-based solutions for children.

Around 8,000 children and young people live in residential care. This number has decreased in recent years. To advance the development of community-based services for children, the government announced that it would work to improve socio-economic support for biological families, increase investment in foster care, adoptions and supported housing for independent living[178].

APSS acknowledges the importance of EU funding for employment (skills training, employment opportunities) and social inclusion[179]. However, the absence of secured long-term funding and job opportunities jeopardises the sustainability of EU-funded projects.

In the field of social support, EU funding has been used to establish 900 social canteens to target the poorest. However, the precarious effects of assistance programmes are well-known and deserve more comprehensive answers. APSS recommends an assessment of how 20% of the European Social Fund, which should be devoted to social inclusion programmes[180], has been invested. This assessment should involve representatives of both beneficiaries, professionals and organisations with experience on the ground. To ensure consistency, this assessment should also include the programmes funded by the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD).

[176] European Commission (2016) The Youth Guarantee country by country. Portugal. http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=13657&langId=en (last accessed 19 September 2016)

[177] For the organisational role of the Secretary of State of Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities, see: Portuguese Republic Government (2016) Minister of Labour, Solidarity, and Social Security. http://www.portugal.gov.pt/en/ministries/mtsss/the-team.aspx (last accessed 19 September 2016)

[178] For an overview on Portuguese's children's services: European Social Network (2016) Investing in Children's Services Improving Outcomes, pp. 83-90 http://www.esn-eu.org/raw.php?page=files&id=2062 (last accessed 19 September 2016)

[179] European Commission (2015) The ESF in Portugal. http://ec.europa.eu/esf/main.jsp?catId=394 (last accessed 19 September 2016)

[180] For 2014-2020, at least 20% of the European Social Fund must be allocated to social inclusion and the support to disadvantaged groups. See European Commission (2014) European Social Fund 2014–2020. http://ec.europa.eu/esf/main.jsp?catId=62 (last accessed 19 September 2016)

Romania

Local social services have been affected by a lack of autonomy and financial constraints. As highlighted in the European Commission's 2016 country report for Romania, local authorities have been affected by diminished autonomy. Moreover, according to the Romanian Association of Social Workers (ASproAS), public policies seem insufficiently tailored to the local context. Financial constraints impact heavily on local authorities, who are responsible for developing community-based social services. In rural and marginalised areas, local budgets have been severely affected by low tax collections and a reduced capacity to apply for EU funds. As a consequence, the following issues have been identified:

- It has been difficult to attract and retain competent social workers and other social services professionals, largely due to a lack of training opportunities.

- The field of social services has suffered from a lack of data collection and monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment. These mechanisms would be useful to identify local needs and plan services accordingly.

- Insufficient investment has been made in social services. Priority has been given to granting social benefits and allowances, and providing emergency responses (for example, emergency accommodation), rather than prevention, counselling and support services.

- There are limitations in terms of social service availability, diversity, accessibility and affordability. According to ASproAS, improvement should be not only quantitative but also qualitative. For instance, the 'monthly coupons', introduced in 2015 by the law on stimulating the participation of children in kindergarten, have resulted in increased participation of vulnerable children. However, these services should be accompanied by proper social and health services, as well as by quality education, provided by trained and motivated teachers, to maximise children's future chances.

ASproAS notes that several vulnerable groups and individuals still do not have access to appropriate needs-based services, including people suffering from multiple deprivation and severe poverty, young people, victims of domestic violence, ex-offenders, people with low educational levels and Roma people.

ASproAS recommends embedding service user involvement in policy and service design and evaluation, and to enhance service integration, eg: by moving forward with the planned 'Integrated Community teams'[181]. Such teams of integrated services were initiated in August 2016 by the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Protection and Older people. They should provide valuable support to the most vulnerable and marginalised communities[182].

Further mechanisms are necessary to improve labour market participation. ASproAS does not expect that the new 'catalogue of services[183]' will improve labour market participation significantly. Therefore, ASproAS recommends that it is complemented by other types of support aiming at the physical and psychological wellbeing of individuals. ASproAS argues that social and economic participation depends on more than mere employability. It points to a growing body of evidence showing the importance of other types of services, such as health services, nutrition and preschool enrolment. For instance, a recent study conducted by the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy (IRES) shows that Romanians are indeed concerned about finding and keeping a job.

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[181] See also ESPN (2016) Flash report: The 'Integrated Package to fight poverty' of social services in Romania: a possible road to institutional effectiveness. http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=15796&langId=en (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[182] The government started to develop so-called integrated intervention teams to offer integrated services to marginalised communities. They will depend on public social assistance services, but the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Protection and Older people will finance them through EU funds http://antisaracie.mmuncii.ro (in Romanian) (last accessed 20 October 2016).

[183] The integrated catalogue of employment services is a government initiative, financed by both the ESF and the national budget. It aims to improve coordination between nationally-funded and ESF-funded measures.

However, their overall quality of life also depends on having access to health insurance (88% of respondents), holidays (88%), meal and gift vouchers (79% and 77%), culture, sports and service vouchers (55%)[184].

For young people, 'social skills' are a precondition for any future labour market integration, as shown by several successful, small-scale Romanian initiatives. An example of this is the ESF-funded programme for young inmates[185], a group that is particularly at risk. In August 2016, the government initiated, as part of its plan against poverty, an integrated programme targeting NEETs, community services, counties' Employment Agencies and employers.

The deinstitutionalisation of children's services has been further supported through new legislation and programmes. According to the National Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights and Adoption (ANPDCA), almost 5,000 children enter the care system every year[186]. New legislation[187] states that no child under three years of age shall be placed in institutional care, except children with severe disabilities that need special care. The 2016-2018 government plan for the protection of children's rights foresees the development of a range of community-based rehabilitation and support services, notably for children with disabilities. Simplified court proceedings and adoption procedures entered into force in September 2016.

ASproAS emphasises the importance of the involvement of the national Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Protection and Older people. The Ministry's involvement is key to:

- Ensure a unified approach to deinstitutionalisation;
- Prevent children's separation from their families and/or reduce placement periods;
- Strengthen the capacity of public social services to support families living in poverty and their children;
- Support families to care for their children with complex needs.

[184] Stiripesurse (2016) 'Study on quality of life in the workplace' http://www.stiripesurse.ro/studiu-despre-calitatea-vietii-la-locul-de-munca_1136832.html (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[185] Such a project has been initiated by CFCECAS (www.cfcecas.ro) and implemented in partnership with the National Administration of Penitentiaries in Romania (the beneficiary of the project), the prisons for juvenile offenders in Craiova, Tichilesti and Gerasdorf, the Austrian Association of Social Workers (OBDS) and the Austrian Ministry of Justice http://www.fonduri-ue.ro/files/publicatii/Brosura.Egalitatea.de.sanse.pdf (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[186] ChildHub (2015) 'Every year, 5,000 children enter the protection system' http://childhub.org/ro/stiri-protectia-copilului/anpdca-anual-5000-de-copii-intra-sistemul-de-protectie (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[187] 2014 amendment to the Law no. 272/2004 on the protection and promotion of children's rights

Slovenia

Slovenia's public administration needs modernising to improve social services. This process is deemed very important by the Slovenian Association of Centres for Social Work (CCSW). Many administrative processes related to office management are said to be cumbersome and outdated (eg: absence of systematic electronic archiving). This hinders the quality and efficiency of social services provided at the local level.

The national government is working on a new programme for incoming and outgoing correspondence, which should be available by 2021. In the meantime, CCSW suggests making the system currently in use by ministries (Lotus notes and SPIS) available also for the Centres for Social Work (CSW). It would make the administration and archiving of documents easier and facilitate communication between public administrations at different levels.

Decision-making processes could also be more flexible and efficient, which would free up more time for social workers to interact with service users. As of 2012, and in accordance with the Social Security Act, a number of responsibilities were transferred to CSW, such as managing benefits applications. This has meant that social workers have had to manage this process, at the expense of field social work and services implementation.

In 2015, 100 placements for social work trainees were created thanks to EU funding. Some of these trainees are now working in CSWs. Considering the long-term effects of labour market integration policies, CCSW financing and programmes for people's reintegration into the labour market should focus on qualitative, long-term outcomes rather than on quantitative data, such as the number of beneficiaries.

Austerity measures have lessened since 1 January 2016. The Financial Social Assistance (FSA) – the Slovenian basic minimum income – increased from EUR 270.82 to EUR 288.81 per month for a single adult. The supplementary allowance was raised from EUR 465.71 to EUR 470.76 per month. The eligibility threshold to obtain a state scholarship was increased from 54% to 56% of the average monthly income per family member. According to CCSW, this is the measure with the widest impact, with 3,218 more recipients. Child supplement was increased by 10% for the two groups with the lowest income. However, social assistance has remained insufficient to cover basic needs, especially for single adults, says CCSW.

Families are less at risk as they receive FSA and other family benefits such as child support, reduced kindergarten fees, lunch subsidies and state scholarships. This may also lead to disincentives to work. In a number of cases, the income of families receiving child benefits and that of parents working for the minimum wage may be the same. To avoid this, CCSW suggests to separate FSA - and the minimum income support it provides - from child benefits.

Already raised as an issue in the 2015 ESN's European Semester report, the number of evicted families has increased, with substantial differences between regions. The government has now established 11 housing projects for families at risk. The Ministry for the Environment and Spatial Planning has prepared a study about rent subsidies, which will be the basis for new legislation on social housing.

A number of measures have discouraged many older people from claiming social benefits. The number of older people receiving benefits was 46,752 in 2012. This figure dropped to 10,500 in 2016. The 2012 law on Social Assistance introduced the possibility of seizing the property of long-term benefits' recipients to repay payments if their property was worth up to EUR 120,000. A recent amendment has been under debate since 19 September 2016 and is expected to

cancel this provision[188].The law also limits the possibility of an older parent to leave an estate inheritance if they receive social benefits[189]. Another obstacle to claiming benefits is the statutory duty for children to financially support their parents[190].

As a consequence, the at-risk of poverty rate for older people is higher than for other age groups: 23.1% for people over 55 against 17% for those aged 25-54[191]. The rate goes up to 30% for women above 75 years old[192]. Pensions can be very low, especially for women who stayed at home for childcare duties. After the death of their partner, they receive about 70% of their pension, which often leaves them at risk of poverty if their own pension is very low.

There is a need to reinforce collaboration between social and employment services. Currently, the CSW exchange information with national public employment services when dealing with the short-term unemployed. They recommend that such collaboration is extended to cases involving those furthest away from the labour market, such as people with substance abuse or mental health problems.

Progress in the fields of long-term care and deinstitutionalisation is uneven. After being postponed several times, a draft law on long-term care and personal assistance should be adopted in 2016. It aims to introduce a "quality, efficient, rational and adapted" system, focusing on prevention and long-term support[193].

Slovenia generally aims to encourage independent living and provide more home care options. Home care is a public social service regulated by the state and financed by the municipalities. However, there is a constant lack of funds. In the absence of sufficient investment, progress is uneven between the municipalities, dependant on how much they prioritise this matter.

Deinstitutionalisation began in the 1980s, but progress has been slow. In 2015, the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities drafted a background paper on this topic[194], based on the National Social Assistance Programme 2013-2020 and taking into account the joint European guidelines for the transition from institutional to community-based care[195]. It foresees the provision of community-based services for 800 older people and 200 children and adults. In addition, 130 community housing units will be provided for 1,100 people.

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[188] Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal opportunities, News, 19.09.2016 http://www.mddsz.gov.si/si/medijsko_sredisce/novica/browse/1/article/1966/7993/ (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[189] Inheritance Act, article 129 http://www.pisrs.si/Pis.web/pregledPredpisa?id=ZAKO317 (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[190] Marriage and Family Relations Act, article 124 http://www.pisrs.si/Pis.web/pregledPredpisa?id=ZAKO40 (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[191] Eurostat, 2015 (latest figure available) http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tessi012&plugin=1 (last accessed 20 October 2016).

[192] See also Jana Mali & Vesna Leskošek (2015) The impact of austerity measures and disintegrating welfare state on social work with older people in Slovenia http://dialogueinpraxis.fsd.uni-lj.si/index.php?id=5&a=article&aid=46#author_info (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[193] Slovenia's 2016 National Reform Programme http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/csr2016/nrp2016_slovenia_en.pdf (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[194] Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities (2015) Izhodišča deinstitucionalizacije v Republiki Sloveniji [Deinstitutionalisation in Slovenia: summary] http://www.mddsz.gov.si/fileadmin/mddsz.gov.si/pageuploads/dokumenti__pdf/sociala/izhodisca_dezinstitucionalizacije_maj_slo_povzetek_03.pdf (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[195] Available at: http://www.esn-eu.org/raw.php?page=files&id=334 (last accessed 20 October 2016)

Spain

The 2013 local administration reform is expected to have a strong impact on public social services. The 2013 Law for the Rationalisation and Sustainability of the Local Administration will see the responsibility for 'basic social services' or community social services transferred from municipalities to the regional authorities. ESN contributors for Spain[196] warn that this law, focussed on reducing deficits, will not support public services in addressing the current social emergency resulting from the crisis.

The law will have profound implications for a social services model that was built on a broad social, professional and political consensus over the last forty years, respecting regional peculiarities while being driven by common principles. The law clashes with regional laws and will greatly influence the provision of local public services, their capacities, and cooperation between administrations. In some cases, local responsibility for social services will be severely reduced or delegated to the regional level without additional allocation of resources. This situation could result in major inequalities between Spanish regions and unequal levels of services, depending on where one lives. Therefore, there is a need to adopt and finance common quality principles at national level to guarantee universal and equal service provision across regions. A human rights based approach could be used to define these standards. For instance, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)[197] could be used as the basis for ensuring adequate social protection across all regions.

As of 2011, the budget granted by the national level to the local level (within the so-called 'Concerted Plan of Basic Social Services') has been cut by approximately EUR 54 million. In these circumstances, EU support, such as that provided by the FEAD was welcome. With a yearly budget of EUR 565 million, FEAD represents more than 17 times the amount that will be allocated to social services within the Concerted Plan. However, ESN's Spanish contributors also warned about the risks of using FEAD for short-term projects covering just immediate needs rather than supporting long-term social inclusion.

ESN's Spanish contributors support the introduction of a guaranteed minimum income, which could help to prevent poverty (including fuel poverty and child poverty) and unemployment from becoming chronic. According to the National Statistics Institute (INE[198]), this would be particularly useful for the most vulnerable, specifically single women aged 35-50 with dependent children and low levels of education.

Enhanced coordination between national and regional governments is needed to support people with dependency needs. The Dependency Law, approved in 2007 and amended in 2012, has had a questionable impact on public social services, as well as on users and carers. The lack of transparency and coordination between the central government and autonomous regions has a direct impact on the implementation of the Law. Such lack of coordination can be seen in the fact that the state budget does not reflect regional waiting lists of dependent users.

According to the law, the costs of specialised services should be equally borne between the central and regional governments. However, this has not always been the case. For instance, in Andalusia, the region's co-financing rate amounts to 70%. The amendments have led to increased out-of-pocket contributions for users. This has resulted in delays to enrolling people with a moderate level of dependency into the system[199] and a lack of promotion of autonomy

[196] General Council of Social work, Welfare departments of the Regions of Andalusia, Galicia and Catalonia.
[197] The ICESCR is based on four pillars: health, guaranteed minimum income and pensions, education, and social services http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CESCR.aspx (last accessed 20 October 2016)
[198] Instituto Nacional de Estadística [National Statistical Institute] (2016) Encuesta Continua de Hogares [Continuous household survey]
[199] "The Dependency Law began to be applied in 2007; it is scheduled to come into force gradually over an eight-year period, starting with cases of severe care needs", Eurofound, 2009.

and prevention. Informal carers have seen their situation worsen. While they were previously enrolled in and protected by the general social security system[200], since 2012[201] this enrolment has been voluntary. Many carers have shifted to a self-employed status. This has resulted in a decrease of about 100,000 (mostly female) carers in the social security system.

Examples of inter-sector coordination have been identified at regional level. The migration crisis has shown the lack of coordination in the field. Migrants need more than emergency solidarity measures, provided by volunteers. They need integrated, employment-oriented social interventions. In Catalonia for instance, a Committee for the Reception of Refugees was set up to coordinate policies for refugees across departments and administrative levels. 1,200 places were created, only 400 of which are currently occupied. Catalonia plans on hosting 4,500 people between 2016 and 2017.

In the field of youth there is also a need for enhanced coordination between social and employment services. This was done in Catalonia thanks to the introduction of 30 low-threshold one-stop-shops where young people can register for the Youth Guarantee, with no conditions attached. Since the beginning of the Youth Guarantee programme in the second half of 2014, nearly 39,000 young people have enrolled in Catalonia.

Indebtedness and housing remain a major problem in Spain. Despite specific progress such as the building of 23,000 social housing units across Spain, decreasing rates of household indebtedness, a high number of families have experienced housing-related debts, combined with job loss, instability and a lack of quality housing. There have been 660,856 foreclosures[202] since the beginning of the crisis[203], 297,299 of which have seen families losing their home.

Public administrations have a duty to ensure that the right to decent housing is enforced. In the Basque Country, it is done through dedicated housing laws. In Catalonia, in addition to a specific law[204] on emergency measures in the field of housing and fuel poverty; information, counselling and mediation services (‘Ofideute’) have been set up to support families struggling with loans or mortgage payments. Andalusia has introduced a similar service under the Housing Defence Programme[205], and so have other regions.

However, most of these measures consist in subsidising rents. They are unlikely to be sustainable since they are emergency measures that are not included in general budgets.

[200] Official State Bulletin (2007) https://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2007/05/12/pdfs/A20601-20602.pdf (last accessed 20 October 2016)
[201] Royal Decree 20/2012 of 13 July 2012
[202] A situation in which a homeowner is unable to make full principal and interest payments on his/her mortgage, which allows the lender to seize the property, evict the homeowner and sell the home, as stipulated in the mortgage contract.
[203] Consejo General del Poder Judicial [General Council of the Judiciary] (2016).
[204] Law 24/2015
[205] ‘Programa Andaluz en Defensa de la Vivienda’

Sweden

Local social services have continued to support migrants' labour market integration and unaccompanied children. During 2016, social services have continued to support the high number of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants who came to Sweden in 2015, says the Swedish Association of Directors of Social Services (FSS). Municipalities have had to recruit additional staff to support the newly arrived migrants through social support, and facilitate their integration into the local community.

Integrating people with a migration background into the labour market has remained a challenge and requires close cooperation between social services and the national employment agency. Learning a new language and having previous educational qualifications and employment records validated are key steps. Social integration often involves agreements between social services and NGOs to provide support.

Programmes and strategies for recruiting refugees and migrants have been developed in many parts of the country, focusing on identifying and using existing migrants' skills and experiences. The IBIS project[206] in the county of Sörmland, for instance, has been developing methods and activities to develop a sustainable basis for fast-tracking newly arrived migrants into employment. Once they have been granted residence in Sweden, newcomers have access to fast-track education and training programmes including language training.

Local social services are responsible for ensuring that unaccompanied migrant children in residential care and foster homes are attending school and given help with their homework. Yet, overstretched services and schools have found it challenging to respond to each individual child's needs. The shortage of foster care for unaccompanied children has been problematic despite continuous recruitment drives, training and development. On another note, new foster care organisations have emerged, many of which are largely unregulated and lack experience, thus raising concerns about quality and safety.

Some groups, such as people with lower educational qualifications and newly arrived migrants, are more likely to be unemployed for longer. When they are not entitled to unemployment insurance payments, they tend to rely on the 'supplementary benefit[207]'. Although this type of benefit is intended to be short-term, it often becomes a long-term form of support.

Social and educational services have a key role to play in helping young people who are not supported through the national employment schemes. This includes identifying these young people as early as possible to find ways of supporting them to continue their education or to start a vocational training course. However, this remains a challenge for social services as still too many young people need to be supported by the 'supplementary benefit' rather than the employment agency. It is still too early to assess how effective the 90-day guarantee[208] will be, but it is expected to speed up access to support for young people. As of the 1 June 2016, this guarantee has been extended to cover newly arrived migrants up to the age of 25, which FSS sees as a very positive step.

The lack of social and affordable housing has been aggravated. As described by ESN in its 2015 report, the lack of social and affordable housing in many Swedish cities has been further exacerbated due to the high number of refugees and migrants in need of housing. Without an active national housing policy, many Swedish municipalities have found it difficult to support vulnerable people in need of housing support who rent private flats

[206] Find more about the project at: Samordningsförbundet RAR Sörmland, IBIS – IntegrationsBygget I Sörmland http://rarsormland.se/insatser-inom-ramen-for-eu/presentation-ibis.aspx (last accessed 12 September 2016)

[207] Vulnerable people, such as the low skilled and those who have been unemployed for long periods of time, when they are not eligible for unemployment insurance (provided by the National Employment Agency), tend to apply for supplementary benefits, thus weighing on local finances.

[208] Government Offices of Sweden (2015) Labour market policy to focus on young people and work environment. http://www.government.se/press-releases/2014/10/labour-market-policy-to-focus-on-young-people-and-work-environment/ (last accessed 12 September 2016)

from landlords. During 2015, the Migration Agency had to rely on the help of the municipalities to find temporary housing for refugees due to the lack of available accommodation. It is recommended that the national government adopts a more proactive housing policy with local authorities sharing investment with housing companies and the state.

Enhanced cooperation between medical and community services is needed to support people with mental health problems. This should ensure optimal support across all municipalities. The quality of services varies considerably across Sweden, although the Swedish Association of Regions and Local Authorities (SKL) and the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs are trying to raise and even out quality across the country. One of the greatest challenges is the recruitment of well-trained professionals in some regions and municipalities, which are not prioritising this issue. The reduction of mental health in-patient places has increased demand for community services, including people who are in a period of stabilisation and would previously have been admitted to in-patient care. People with mental health conditions now tend to be released earlier – perhaps prematurely in some cases – from in-patient facilities. This has put pressure on community-based services to meet the highly complex needs of some service users.

A number of projects across Sweden were supported by EU funds last year, often targeting young people furthest from the labour market, migrants and refugees. Many projects focus on the need to improve cooperation between different authorities and agencies, for instance between municipalities, county councils, the Employment Agency and the Social Insurance Agency (Samordningsförbundet).

The SUSA project, running in the municipality of Stockholm between 2015 and 2019, aims to reduce high school drop outs (roughly one out of three students in Stockholm). SUSA provides support for young people aged 15-19 who are at risk of having substantial difficulties entering the labour market, due to social problems or because they have not completed secondary school[209].

FSS suggests that EU funds could be used more to support local projects teaching migrants transferable skills and helping them to start a business using their skills and experience.

[209] See more on the Swedish ESF Council's website http://www.esf.se/sv/Resultat/Projektbanken-2014-2020/Alla-Projekt/SUSA/ (last accessed 20 October 2016)

United Kingdom

Disclaimer: This country profile covers Scotland only.

Poverty and social exclusion figures have remained broadly stable. More emphasis should be put on alleviating poverty for vulnerable groups, according to Social Work Scotland[210]**.** In 2014-2015, after housing costs, 12% of children were living in combined low income and material deprivation, a decrease from 14% the previous year. However, the overall figure for relative poverty remained the same[211].

Families experiencing in-work poverty continue to face considerable issues. To address these, the UK Government and the devolved administrations, such as the Scottish Government, have committed to a living wage and invested in additional free childcare. At local level, Renfrewshire Council has invested in initiatives such as the 'cost of the school day'[212] to alleviate child poverty. This has been reported to make a tangible difference for eligible students; for example, by co-financing the costs of school trips and providing sports equipment.[213] In Edinburgh the One in Five initiative has provided practical support for families and guidance for staff in schools to reduce the impact of poverty and inequality.

The Scottish Government is currently undertaking a consultation on a new Child Poverty Bill, which is seeking to enshrine in legislation an ambition to eradicate child poverty. However, the UK Government intends to reduce the unemployment/low income benefits cap in November 2016 (except for those in receipt of carer's allowance) and the intention of the UK government is to restrict low-income child tax credits to two children per family[214]. This will potentially increase the number of children experiencing poverty and make the aim of eradicating child poverty more difficult for the Scottish Government to achieve.

The UK Government's welfare reform[215] has continued to have a detrimental effect on people with disabilities across the four UK countries, especially since the introduction of new criteria for accessing disability benefits such as 'Personal Independence Payments' (PIP)[216]. As a result, some disabled people might see their benefits discontinued, as the newly introduced PIP uses an assessment procedure which places less weighting on dependence on support for managing toilet needs or dressing[217].

The affordability of housing continues to be a significant issue, with significant variations across the UK four countries. Furthermore, the 'bedroom tax' affects people receiving housing benefits when they have a spare bedroom in their home[218]. These benefit reductions have increased tenants' rent arrears. In response, the Scottish Government has committed to creating more affordable social housing[219].

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[210] Social Work Scotland is the professional leadership body for the social work and social care professions.
[211] Scottish Government (2015) Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland: 2014/15 http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0050/00502180.pdf (last accessed 20 October 2016)
[212] Renfrewshire's Tackling Poverty Commission's Report (2015) (p. 19) http://www.renfrewshire2023.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/ce-RenfrewshireTPCReport.pdf (last accessed 13 September 2016)
[213] BBC (27 August 2016) Renfrewshire fund helps families with school costs http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-37198664 (last accessed 13 September 2016)
[214] Child Poverty Action Group (2016) Promoting fairness? Lowering the benefit cap will push more families into poverty http://www.cpag.org.uk/content/promoting-fairness-lowering-benefit-cap-will-push-more-families-poverty (last accessed 20 October 2016)
[215] See also UK Government Department for Work and Pension (n. d.) Welfare reform. https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/welfare-reform (last accessed 14 September 2016)
[216] See more at: https://www.gov.uk/pip/overview (last accessed 13 September 2016)
[217] UK Government (2016) Personal Independence Payment consultation response announced https://www.gov.uk/government/news/personal-independence-payment-consultation-response-announced (last accessed 13 September 2016)
[218] Shelter Scotland (n. d.) The 'bedroom tax' http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/get_advice/advice_topics/paying_for_a_home/housing_benefit/the_bedroom_tax (last accessed 13 September 2016)
[219] Scottish Government (2016) More affordable housing approved http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Built-

The integration of health and social care in Scotland commenced on 1 April 2016 with the formation of joint boards with shared governance, management and financial arrangements[220]. Integration is based on local partnership arrangements between the National Health Service (NHS) and local public services. Progress to date has focussed mainly on putting governance structures in place. Commissioning plans have been agreed and positive progress towards achieving the nationally agreed outcomes will be tested in the future.

Measures have been introduced to improve children's services in Scotland. The 'Attainment Scotland Fund'[221] has been expanded to support areas with a high concentration of primary school pupils living in deprivation. The Scottish Government has committed to doubling the number of early learning and childcare hours offered free of charge to parents. Some local authorities are exploring models of delivery to maximise this resource. For example, Renfrewshire is working with the national organisation 'Children in Scotland' to develop a more flexible model of childcare. In Edinburgh, pioneering work on literacy in the early years has resulted in statistically significant improvement.

A review of the national child protection system has been recently launched[222]. A key feature will be the impact of child neglect, leadership and development of the workforce. Social Work Scotland has recommended an examination of the situation of unaccompanied children.

Youth in Scotland outperform their UK counterparts in terms of employment and tackling inactivity[223]. In Scotland, responsibility for youth employability sits within the wider community planning framework and action tends to be taken on a partnership basis between local councils, the NHS, third sector partners and specific employability services. As an example of good local practice, Renfrewshire has introduced a successful joint employability initiative, which has been expanded and funded in the framework of the local 'Tackling Poverty' Commission[224] to address the needs of young people from low-income households. In Edinburgh, the award-winning 'Edinburgh Guarantee' has ensured positive outcomes for the majority of young people when they move on from school.

Following the recent decision by the UK to leave the EU, there needs to be an immediate assessment of EU grant funding availability for projects. It is therefore necessary to assess the impact of EU funding withdrawal on vulnerable groups, such as the group covered by the 'Project Search' employability scheme for people with learning disabilities in Renfrewshire[225].

Environment/Housing/reform/more-homes-scotland (last accessed 20 October 2016)

[220] Scottish Government (n.d.) Integration of Health and Social Care http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Health/Policy/Adult-Health-SocialCare-Integration (last accessed 14 September 2016)

[221] Education Scotland (n.d.) Attainment Scotland Fund http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/inclusionandequalities/sac/fund/index.asp (last accessed 14 September 2016)

[222] Scottish Government (2016) Keeping children safe http://www.gov.scot/Topics/People/Young-People/protecting/child-protection (last accessed 14 September 2016)

[223] Scottish Government (August 2016) Quarterly Labour Market Briefing http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0050/00504632.pdf (last accessed 13 September 2016)

[224] Renfrewshire Council (2015) Tackling Poverty in Renfrewshire. Tackling Poverty Strategy 2015–2017. http://www.renfrewshire.gov.uk/media/1040/Tackling-Poverty-Strategy-2015-2017/pdf/TacklingPovertyStrategy.pdf (last accessed 13 September 2016)

[225] Renfrewshire Council (n.d.) Project SEARCH. http://www.investinrenfrewshire.com/projectsearch/ (last accessed 14 September 2016)

5. Key concluding messages

Throughout 2015 and 2016, the European Commission introduced several changes in the European Semester process to enhance stakeholders' ownership of the process. In this light, the Commission's analysis of each Member State's economic and social situation, the so-called country report, is now published two months before the Commission issues Country-specific Recommendations to each Member State. This two months period is used for meetings in Member States, which usually involve civil servants, social partners and NGOs. Despite this move towards greater dialogue, a lack of consultation with the social affairs departments of regional and local authorities has been identified by ESN's Reference Group on the Semester. Taking into account that social policies have been increasingly decentralised to regional and local authorities in most Member States, this is an issue that should be addressed with a view to improving implementation and creating more ownership of the process.

There are several recurring themes that have emerged when analysing the 25 countries presented in this report, regardless of their social welfare systems. These are: the availability of childcare and the development of family-based approaches in child protection, youth, long-term unemployment, support for people with severe mental health problems and disabilities, housing problems and the impact of the refugee crisis on public services. This suggests that cross-country feedback and insights are vital. It also reinforces all the more EU-wide efforts to encourage mechanisms to promote better welfare systems and service provision, especially for vulnerable groups across Member States.

The fallout from the financial crisis remains significant for several countries. Where this is the case, the consequences for social services are not only serious but enduring, impacting families and vulnerable groups across the board. A central point is how much this risks becoming 'the new normal' and the danger that vital investment and innovation could be abandoned. Tension between national, regional and local administrations and systems continue in many - if not all - states. Restructuring, but mostly fiscal priorities, appear to dominate many strategies.

The availability of childcare for the most disadvantaged children varies significantly across countries. The report's findings emphasise that quality, coverage and intensity of early childcare are still low in many Member States. Though progress has been recorded in terms of coverage, the cost of childcare is still high for poorer families, which impacts on parental employment and decisions as to whether children should be cared for at home. When it comes to child protection, there has been a significant move towards prevention; for instance, through the establishment of family support workers to prevent children from being taken into care. However, with a significant number of children still in institutions, further work is necessary to improve foster care for the most vulnerable children, in particular children with disabilities.

On employment, the impact of the crisis is still reverberating. Clearly, youth unemployment and long-term unemployment are a cause for considerable concern across Member States. However, many contributors to the report highlighted the issue of how 'activation' has become the norm, which is very significant for how employment policies and services are configured. The report findings suggest a need to develop broader social inclusion strategies along the lines of the concept of 'social sustainability', meaning that social policies should aim not only at including people in the labour market but at improving people's overall quality of life. Minimum income schemes appear to feature prominently in some countries as a tool for mitigating poverty with some strong examples of how it might work.

The issue of supporting people with several mental health problems and with disabilities, especially those with complex or multiple disabilities, presents an enduring set of challenges, not least of which are poverty and deinstitutionalisation. Even where there is progress, at times if feels slow in many places. The report's findings suggest it is important that this issue does not slide down the list of priorities as public budgets continue to come under threat.

Housing exclusion was referred to as an increasingly prominent issue. Problems related to housing are no longer limited to the most vulnerable groups, and increasingly concern more people from middle classes. With many urban areas identified as unaffordable and with difficulties in the social housing sector including overall stock, this is clearly a central theme that will be salient across the Member States in years to come.

The refugee crisis and its impact on public services have come to be a major consideration for several countries over the past year, and are apparent throughout the report. There seems to be a will in many places to try to provide the best care, support and training to promote refugees' social integration. However, against a backdrop of strained resources, it is certainly a major challenge to be able to go forward in terms of service provision and social integration.

Despite these challenges, there is considerable innovation in every country notwithstanding constraints on budgets. And, it is worth highlighting that this continues to be the case. Alongside this, it is clear that the consistency of service provision and a focus on evidence-based practice are things that those working in the social services sector want to see more of. In addition, it is certainly something service users stand to gain from. Ensuring, and drawing upon, evidence and evaluation across the whole sector and throughout local, regional and national levels has been highlighted as a priority for all.

6. Annexes

6.1. Glossary

Alert Mechanism Report
It is the starting point of the macro-imbalance procedure (an economic surveillance procedure). Based on a scoreboard of indicators, it is a filter to identify countries and issues for which a closer analysis (in-depth review) is deemed necessary.

Annual Growth Survey (AGS)
The AGS launches the European Semester. It is the first step of the cycle. It sets out the broad EU economic priorities for the year to come, based on the analysis of the economic and social situation in Europe

Country report(s)
Analytical documents (one per Member State) from the European Commission. Published in February, they analyse the economic situation in Member States and include in-depth reviews for the 16 Member States experiencing the **Macroeconomic Imbalances Procedure**. They replace previous **Staff Working Documents**.

Country-specific Recommendations (CSRs)
Individual recommendations given to Member States in the context of the European Semester. Their content varies for each county according to the challenges and priorities identified by the Commission services. They are drafted by the European Commission and adopted by Member States in the Council in June. The accompanying **country report** develops the issues raised in the CSRs and other issues which appeared when assessing each country's national programme.

Europe 2020 Strategy (or EU 2020 Strategy) and targets
The EU's ten-year growth and jobs Strategy, launched in 2010. It revolves around five headline targets covering employment; research and development/innovation; climate change/energy; education, and social inclusion/poverty reduction. It is supported by seven flagship initiatives in the fields of innovation, the digital economy, employment, youth, industrial policy, poverty and resource efficiency.

EU 2020 Strategy indicators
They are used to measure the progress towards EU 2020 Strategy headline targets. Among them, four relate to poverty and social exclusion: people at risk of poverty or social exclusion; people living in households with very low work intensity; people at risk of poverty after social transfers; severely materially deprived people[226].

European Pillar of Social Rights
Launched on 8 March 2016 by the European Commission, the Pillar aims to define the basic principles to promote fair and well-functioning labour markets and social protection systems, and promote social convergence. Its exact content and purpose are currently being discussed.

[226] Full definitions and options are available in the Eurostat database under the 'Europe 2020 indicators' tab.

European Semester
Cycle of economic policy coordination among Member States. National targets set by Member States in the context of the EU 2020 Strategy feed into the European Semester process.

European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF)
There are 5 EU structural and investment funds for the 2014-2020 funding period: European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), European Social Fund (ESF), Cohesion Fund (CF), European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), European Maritime & Fisheries Fund (EMFF). They are governed by a single set of rules, whose purpose is to reinforce their link to the Europe 2020 Strategy and improve coordination.

Excessive Deficit Procedure
Process through which Member States try and correct excessive deficits, defined by the Treaty as 3% of deficit to GDP and 60% of debt to GDP. Currently, 6 Member States are subject to the EDP (there were 9 in 2015 and 24 in 2011).

Macroeconomic Imbalances Procedure
A surveillance mechanism aimed at preventing and correcting excessive public deficits in EU Member States.

National Reform Programmes (NRPs)
Document drafted by each Member State, presenting its policies and measures to reach the EU 2020 Strategy targets. The NRP is presented in parallel with the Stability or Convergence Programme[227], which sets out the country's budgetary plans for the coming three or four years.

Stability and Convergence Programmes
See Stability and Growth Pact; National Reform Programme.

Stability and Growth Pact
Framework for the coordination of national fiscal policies in the EU, established to safeguard sound public finances. The prevention side is ensured by the analysis of Member States' medium-term budgetary plans (the 'stability' or 'convergence' programmes), while the corrective aspect is made operational by the **Excessive Deficit Procedure** (EDP).

Staff working document (SWD)
Until 2014, SWDs (one per Member State) were published with the CSRs. They explain the rationale behind each CSRs. In 2015, they were replaced by **country reports**.

[227] Stability Programmes are submitted by euro area Member States, while Convergence Programmes, which also contain monetary strategies, are submitted by non-euro area Member States.

6.2. European Commission's 2015/2016 Country-specific Recommendations

	Health and/or social care		Childcare		Active labour market		Wage setting		Education		Skills and lifelong learning		Poverty & social inclusion		Social assistance and benefits		Public administration		Housing	
AT		2016	2015		2015					2016							2015			
BE					2015	2016	2015	2016		2016	2015	2016					2015			
BG	2015	2016				2016	2015	2016	2015	2016			2015	2016		2016	2015	2016		
CY	No data	2016			No data	2016	No data		No data				No data				No data	2016	No data	
CZ	2015	2016	2015						2015				2015	2016			2015	2016		
DE					2015	2016														
DK																	2015			
EE	2015		2015		2015			2016			2015						2015	2016		
ES	2015	2016		2016	2015	2016	2015				2015			2016			2015	2016		
FI	2015	2016			2015	2016	2015	2016			2015	2016					2015	2016		
FR					2015		2015	2016		2016		2016					2015			
HR	2015	2016			2015		2015	2016				2016		2016	2015	2016	2015	2016		
HU					2015	2016			2015	2016	2015		2015	2016	2015		2015	2016		
IE	2015	2016	2015	2016	2015	2016							2015	2016	2015	2016				2016
IT		2016			2015	2016	2015		2015					2016			2015	2016		
LT		2016			2015	2016			2015	2016	2015	2016			2015	2016				
LV	2015	2016			2015	2016	2015				2015	2016		2016	2015	2016	2015	2016		
NL																			2015	2016
PL					2015					2016		2016								
PT		2016			2015	2016	2015	2016						2016	2015		2015	2016		
RO	2015	2016	2015		2015	2016	2015	2016	2015	2016		2016	2015	2016		2016	2015	2016		
SE																			2015	2016
SI	2015	2016			2015	2016	2015				2015	2016					2015	2016		
UK			2015	2016	2015							2016							2015	2016

Key:
2015
2016
No issue
No data

This table presents the **challenges** identified by the European Commission's CSRs during the European Semester in 2015 & 2016. We have highlighted the issues of particular interest to ESN's work.

This table presents the challenges identified by the European Commission during the European Semester 2015/2016

6.3. Useful resources

About the European Semester

European Commission (2016) European Semester 2016 Spring Package explained – factsheet. Available at: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-16-1727_en.htm

European Commission (2016) webpage featuring all key 2016 EU Semester documents per country http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/making-it-happen/country-specific-recommendations/index_en.htm

European Council (2016) European Semester: a guide to the main rules and documents. Available at: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/european-semester/european-semester-key-rules-and-documents/

The European Commission's dedicated webpage on Europe 2020, with targets and national profiles http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index_en.htm

European Parliament (2016) Country Specific Recommendations for 2015 and 2016: A comparison and an overview of implementation. Available at: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/497766/IPOL_STU(2016)497766_EN.pdf

European Commission (2016) Towards a European Pillar of Social Rights, Website of the initiative http://ec.europa.eu/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/towards-european-pillar-social-rights_en

Other EU documents and guidance

European Union (2016) State of the Union 2016 - by Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission. Available at: http://bookshop.europa.eu/en/state-of-the-union-2016-pbNA0216997/

Jean-Claude Juncker (2014) A New Start for Europe: My Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change. Political Guidelines for the next European Commission. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/priorities/docs/pg_en.pdf

European Social Network

European Social Network (2015) Looking ahead: Local public social services priorities for the European Semester 2016. Available at: http://www.esn-eu.org/news/727/index.html

Lara Montero, A.; Investing in Children's Services, improving outcomes, European Social Network, Brighton, United Kingdom 2016. Available at: http://www.esn-eu.org/publications/index.html

Lara Montero, A.; van Duijn, S.; Zonneveld, N.; Minkman, M.; Nies, H.; Integrated Social Services in Europe, European Social Network, Brighton, 2016. Available at: http://www.esn-eu.org/publications/index.html

NOTES

The European Social Network (ESN) is the independent network for local public social services in Europe. It brings together people who plan, finance, research, manage, regulate and deliver local public social services, including health, social welfare, employment, education and housing. We support the development of effective social policy and social care practice through the exchange of knowledge and experience.

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