

# FUNDING SOCIAL SERVICES RECOVERY

**Anchoring social services  
in post-Covid national reform plans**



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# 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 the organisations that plan, deliver, finance, manage, research, and regulate 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 expertise.

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# About this report

This report gathers the analysis conducted by ESN members who agreed to review the National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) submitted by their national governments. The report covers 19 EU Member States and illustrates an analysis of public social services involvement in the development of the NRRPs and the content of the Plans regarding planned investments in the social services’ sector.

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# Contents

INTRODUCTION ..... 6

CROSS-COUNTRY ANALYSIS ..... 10

COUNTRY PROFILES ..... 22

    Austria ..... 24

    Belgium ..... 26

    Croatia ..... 28

    Czech Republic ..... 30

    Denmark ..... 32

    Estonia ..... 34

    Finland ..... 36

    France ..... 38

    Germany ..... 40

    Greece ..... 42

    Ireland ..... 44

    Italy ..... 46

    Latvia ..... 48

    Poland ..... 50

    Romania ..... 52

    Slovakia ..... 54

    Slovenia ..... 56

    Spain ..... 58

    Sweden ..... 60

CONCLUDING REMARKS ..... 62



# INTRODUCTION

## Working Group on EU Funding for Social Services

The European Social Network (ESN) is the leading network for public social services in Europe. Social services are responsible for the provision of support for people who need them to improve their wellbeing and overcome difficult life situations so that they can be as autonomous as possible. Social services are also a significant source of employment with an estimated 4.7% of the total EU labour force and 10.9 million professionals<sup>1</sup>. Social services may include supporting families, homeless people, adults with disabilities, children at risk of neglect or harm, migrants, and older people.

Public social services in Europe usually operate within local or regional authorities where they plan, regulate, manage, finance and provide a range of different services. Despite their key role in implementation, they are often not requested to be engaged in European related policy and decision-making processes affecting them. Since 2014, ESN has tried to bridge this gap through its Reference Group on the European Semester (see below).

In 2021, the European Commission did not hold the European Semester cycle of policy coordination with Member States so that national authorities could instead focus on submitting their National Recovery and Resilience Plans to access funding for essential reforms in the aftermath of Covid-19. Likewise, ESN has been shadowing this process, assessing the submitted NRRPs so as to investigate how they foresee funding for social services reforms. To this aim, the Working Group on EU Funding for Social Services was launched.

## The European Semester

Introduced in 2010, the European Semester is the cycle through which the European Commission coordinates the macroeconomic and social policies of Member States. It follows an annual cycle:

- The Annual Growth Survey, now called Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy (ASGS), is usually issued in November and sets out general economic and social priorities for the EU in the year ahead.
- Individual Country Reports are issued in winter for each Member State to provide in-depth analysis of the social and economic state-of-play.
- National Reform Programmes and Stability/Convergence Programmes are presented by the Member States in spring to outline specific policies each country will implement to address the economic and social priorities raised by the Commission in their assessment of each country.
- Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs) are issued in June to provide tailored policy guidance to each Member State.



## ESN Working Group on the European Semester

Each year, this Group has been following the development of the European Semester by completing a tailored questionnaire prepared by the ESN Secretariat. The result of this analysis has been the publication of an annual report that illustrates the social situation according to public social services in Member States, with recommendations for the next European Semester cycle.

Set-up in 2014, the Group's aim has been to share awareness of issues social services face at local level, provide policy recommendations to the European Commission on how these issues can be tackled, and raise the profile of social services in European policy-making.

The recent publication of the Group was the report on European Semester 2020 [“Investing in Social Services, investing in Europe. Social Services Essential for Europe’s Recovery”](#), focusing on three important Principles captured within the European Pillar of Social Rights affecting local social policy implementation: childcare and support for children; long-term care and housing and support for the homeless.

## Recovery and Resilience Facility

Through the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), the EC will make 672.5 billion EUR in loans and grants available to support reforms and investments undertaken by Member States. The aim is to mitigate the economic and social impact of the coronavirus pandemic and make European economies and societies more sustainable, resilient, and better prepared for the challenges and opportunities of the green and digital transitions. ESN has been highlighting that these two transitions should be complemented by a fair and social one, which seems to be less prominent despite the negative social impact that Covid-19 has had on communities across Europe.

To benefit from the RRF, Member States have been submitting the National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) setting out a coherent package of reforms and public investment projects. All these reforms and investments should be implemented by 2026. The NRRPs are then assessed by the European Commission for their compatibility with the priorities of the EU recovery strategy.

The RRF can be a transformational opportunity for public social services that have a statutory duty to promote the social inclusion of people in difficult and vulnerable situations. In an environment of severe global uncertainty, the role of public authorities has been increasingly seen as more reliable than individual interests and free market principles. This being the case, recent European policy and funding decisions represent an important opportunity to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. However, the EC's guidance for the implementation of the European Recovery Funds to national authorities failed to acknowledge and resource the historic and prolonged underinvestment in public social support and social care services.

It is ESN's ambition to support social services to fully benefit from the potential of the RRFs to support the most vulnerable populations, contribute to local growth in our societies, and focus on the transformation of the care model to be community-focused, ensuring the quality and dynamic development of public social services.



<sup>1</sup> EUROSTAT, Labour Force Survey, extraction for Residential care activities (NACE 87) + Social work activities (NACE 88). Employment by sex, worker aged 15 and over.



## Methodology

Together with its members, ESN has undertaken a preliminary assessment of the NRRPs regarding the planned investments that they contain in social services. ESN prepared and sent members questionnaires requesting their assessment of the Plans. Questions explored three areas of knowledge regarding the NRRPs:

1. Involvement of public authorities with responsibility for social services in the creation of the NRRPs;
2. Inclusion of specific investments in social services in the NRRPs;
3. Based on respondents' experience in managing the European Social Fund, the challenges they anticipate in managing programmes funded with the EU RRFs.



By the end of May, we had received completed questionnaires from our members in 19 Member States:

- Austria
- Belgium
- Croatia
- Czech Republic
- Denmark
- Estonia
- Finland
- France
- Germany
- Greece
- Ireland
- Italy
- Latvia
- Poland
- Romania
- Slovakia
- Slovenia
- Spain
- Sweden

We used the answers to create country profiles covering the above 1 to 3 themes. As of 5 July, 16 of these country profiles are based on the final NRRPs submitted by the Member States to the European Commission (AT, BE, DK, DE, EE, ES, FI, FR, HR, IE, IT, LV, RO, SE, SI, SK) and three on the draft NRRPs (CZ, EL, PL).

## Webinar

The deadline set by the European Commission for Member States to submit their NRRPs was 30 April. Taking this deadline into account, ESN organised a webinar with its members four weeks after to assess their views of the submitted Plans (not all the Plans had been submitted by then).

After drafting and submitting their answers to the questionnaires, ESN members met on 27 May to discuss their views and engaged in conversations with MEPs responsible for following up the social aspects of the NRRPs in the RRF Working Group of the Budgetary and Economics Committees<sup>2</sup>. The webinar aimed to evaluate the implementation of EU social priorities and investments in social services in the NRRPs and create a space for the exchange of relevant experiences between ESN members.



## The report

The outcomes of the meeting and the analysis provided by our members in the questionnaires have been gathered into this report put together by ESN. It contains individual country profiles and policy recommendations based on the group's input, with 19 countries represented this year.

This report is shared with the European Commission (EC) to inform their process of evaluation of NRRPs. The Group members are also encouraged and supported to hold national meetings with EC representatives responsible for individual country evaluations. This has been the case for Spain, Italy and Romania so far.

<sup>2</sup> The composition of the Working Group is available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/231583/RRF%20WG%20-%20Composition.pdf>.



# CROSS-COUNTRY ANALYSIS

## Introduction

The questionnaires received from ESN members allowed us to draw preliminary cross-country conclusions regarding direct investments in social services programmes in the National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs).

The key themes that this cross-country analysis covers are:

1. **The participation** of national and regional authorities and third sector representatives responsible for social services in the process of developing the NRRPs;
2. **The content** of the NRRPs with regards to resources allocated to social services alongside the social issues addressed and the vulnerable populations covered by planned investments;

3. Challenges concerning **the management** of EU Funds which may hinder the effective use of recovery funds

The analysis is based on the answers to the questionnaires provided by our members. The questionnaires were structured around these three main areas and included a series of sub-questions under each area. Regarding their potential participation in the development of the NRRPs, the respondents were requested to share whether they had been informed who were the authorities responsible for the creation of the NRRPs and subsequent steps in the NRRPs' creation process. They were also asked to indicate whether they had the opportunity to submit their projects for the NRRPs and participate in public consultations before creating the Plan and after the publication of its draft version.

Regarding the content of the NRRPs, the questionnaire aimed at identifying vulnerable

groups and crucial social issues covered by the Plans alongside the gaps, especially those relevant for social services in members' national contexts. Respondents could also indicate some general investment trends included in the NRRPs that could apply to social services, even if the Plans did not clearly reference social services. For example, digitalisation in the public sector is an example of an investment that we expect would benefit social services, but it was not always highlighted that public administration digitalisation would cover social services, too. In the questionnaire, we also requested a preliminary assessment of the planned allocation of financial resources for social inclusion and public social services and considered whether the implementation of the NRRP could bring us closer to achieving the goals of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) Action Plan, in particular, to substantially reduce the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion.

Regarding anticipating management issues that may arise with the implementation of the funds, respondents were expected to provide information on the primary barriers in access-

ing and effectively managing EU funds, based on their experience. Having this in mind, we wanted to explore whether they felt that they might face similar obstacles concerning the RRF and whether these obstacles may reduce the effectiveness of using the recovery funds. Finally, we also enquired about suggestions for possible changes in the management of EU funds to facilitate their disbursement and achieve their intended objectives.

For each of the above themes and questions, the report provides an overview of key messages. Countries that have developed along similar lines are listed in brackets (e.g. AT, BE, DE) so that readers interested in knowing more about them can examine the individual country profile in the next section of the report.



# KEY FINDINGS

## I. SOCIAL SERVICES FOCUS IN THE NRRPS

All NRRPs have been evaluated against common criteria regarding the coverage of key social issues and vulnerable populations in the Plans. To this aim, respondents were requested to indicate whether their national NRRPs include social inclusion objectives like addressing unemployment, poverty, homelessness, long-term care, child protection, the development of social services' workforce and digitalisation of social services. Respondents were also requested to assess whether the Plans foresee investment in support for older people, children and families, youth, persons with disabilities, persons with mental health issues, and refugees and migrants. Finally, respondents were requested to assess the estimated share of resources that would be allocated to investments in public social services within the Plans.

### a. Unemployment

Combating unemployment is one of the primary goals contained in the [EPSR Action Plan](#). According to the Action Plan, at least 78% of the population, aged 20 to 64 should be in employment by 2030 and at least 60% of all adults should participate in training every year. This priority is well represented in all the analysed NRRPs. However, several respondents noted that social inclusion measures were almost entirely limited to increasing participation in the labour market (DE, EL, LV, PL) which is not enough to address many intricate social challenges. Additionally, the proposed solutions were rarely considered innovative as they were in most cases prolonging already existing measures.

### b. Poverty

According to the EPSR Action Plan the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion should be reduced by at least 15 million by 2030. It is expected that this goal would be reflected in the NRRPs, as the number of people living below the subsistence level increased dramatically as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic. Just eight of the reviewed Plans contain explicit objectives related to eradicating poverty (AT, BE, DK, EL, ES, FR, LV, SE). Where present, anti-poverty efforts involve primarily the introduction of a minimum basic income and less

often attempt to address the structural causes of the problem.

### c. Homelessness

The Covid-19 pandemic has proved particularly unforgiving to people in homelessness situations and exposed systemic gaps in support for them. The situation has been further exacerbated by extremely difficult conditions in shelters, where maintaining appropriate physical distancing often proved difficult due to lack of appropriate facilities, staff and funds. In this context, of the countries assessed, we just identified five NRRPs, including investments to address the housing problem (BE, DK, FR, IT, SE). Proposed solutions included investments in social housing construction, housing renovations, and the fight against energy poverty. However, respondents pointed out that households over-indebtedness that leads in many cases to homelessness were not addressed (EL).



### d. Long-Term Care

Another population that was severely affected by the pandemic were dependent persons in residential care or living alone. In the first case, the inherent vulnerability of older and chronically ill people, coupled with a continuing shortage of care staff, resulted in dramatic rates of Covid-19 morbidity and mortality within social care residential facilities. In the second case, the transition to remote service delivery left many people without the necessary support regarding daily assistance and rehabilitation either due to lack of staff or protection equipment. The majority of Member States have recognised these challenges and included long-term care reforms in their NRRPs (AT, CZ, DK, EE, ES, IT, FI, LV, RO, SE, SI, SK), although there are still several Plans that do not address long-term-care (DE, EL, IE, FR, PL).

The proposed investments include mainly the development of community services to prevent institutionalisation (HR, LV). However, some respondents expressed concerns that more than 50% of the funding was being oriented to investment in residential long-term care facilities rather than promoting community and home-based care (ES).

### e. Child Protection

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to an increase in the number of cases of domestic violence against women and against children. The increase in numbers was recorded particularly as lockdowns were lifted. Meanwhile, schools, which many times are the places where signs of neglect or harm might be noticed and reported to the appropriate services, remained closed. Schools closure also affected poorer children who access nutrition services through them. The situation of children was further exacerbated by the deteriorating financial situa-



tion of many families and protracted isolation from the peer group, resulting in physical and mental health problems.

In this context, it is concerning that specific investments in child protection are just referenced in three countries. Other investments like early child care are mentioned in the NRRPs mostly with a focus on increasing the number of places in nurseries and kindergartens and the construction of new and accessible facilities.

### f. Social services workforce

Many of these challenges have in common an ongoing shortage of qualified staff in social services. Low wages in the sector and demanding working conditions result in a continuing lack of experienced staff - a problem that had been already discussed before the pandemic, but which has now assumed critical proportions. It would seem that the high demand in the sector combined with high unemployment rates in some Member States presents an excellent opportunity for investment in the development of the social services workforce. Unfortunately, only four NRRPs included relevant objectives in this area (FI, IT, SE, SK).

However, even if a specific social services workforce strategy is not included in the submitted Plans, some NRRPs include investments in training of existing staff. Proposals include the development of social mentoring services and social services' training in the provision of community-based services (HR). Another example relates to improvements in facilities providing social support services and diversity training of social services' workforce to fight discrimina-



tion based on gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, nationality and other characteristics (EL). However, several respondents highlighted that investments in better integration and co-ordination between various agencies/services providing social support was missing (PL).

**g. Digitalisation of social services**

As the digital and green transitions are the EU flagships of the recovery strategy, virtually all NRRPs include investments in these areas. In most NRRPs, respondents saw opportunities for the development of digitalisation of social services as well (CZ, BE, DE, DK, EL, ES, FI, IT, LV, SE, SK). A caveat, however, is that some of these investments are envisioned as part of the overall goal of digitalising public administration, and it is not entirely clear whether social services' administrations and providers will be ultimately included in the group of beneficiaries (DE, SK).

Despite the investment, several respondents highlighted concerns that the digitalisation proposals might lead to further exclusion of older people and those without access to electronic devices (LV, PL), because most NRRPs do not include specific measures to address the digital divide.



**h. Support for vulnerable populations**

Most NRRPs have included investment in some form of support for older people (AT, BE, CZ, DK, EE, EL, ES, IT, LV, PL, RO, SE, SI, SK) and children and families (AT, BE, CZ, DE, DK, EE, EL, FI, FR, IT, PL, RO, SK), which are most often considered to be vulnerable groups.

Support for young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds or those leaving the care system, was less frequently included (AT, BE, CZ, DE, DK, EE, ES, FI, FR, IT, SI, SK).

Even fewer Plans included systemic reform of systems supporting people with disabilities (BE, DK, EE, EL, FI, FR, IT, LV, RO, SI, SK), while investments in mental health are planned only in five of the analysed NRRPs (BE, DK, EE, EL, FI, SL).

Finally, only four NRRPs include provisions concerning the effective integration of refugees and migrants (BE, DK, ES, SE).

Several questionnaires pointed out that there is a lack of suggested solutions for people living in isolation in rural areas, ex-prisoners as they go back to the community, people suffering from alcohol or drug abuse, and full-time workers who cannot afford to support themselves.

**i. Allocation of Resources**

Assessing the proposed allocation of funds for investments in social services is virtually impossible at this stage, as most NRRPs either do not include a breakdown of funds for particular objectives or the breakdown is too general to assess how it will translate into investments in specific activities. Exemplary headlines under which investments in social services may be included, are as broad as “social cohesion” or “social inclusion”, and they are mostly focused

on measures to combat unemployment (CZ, HR, IT, RO, SK). Where estimated resource allocation is available, it is more often considered insufficient to combat the social impacts of the pandemic (DE, ES, LV, PL). Though there are examples where ESN members have deemed investments to be sufficient to achieve the aim for which they were designed (DK, FI).

In general, there has been little attention given to investment in social services reforms in the Plans, even though social services have proved to be an essential service during the emer-

gency situation brought about by Covid-19. Respondents expressed concerns that the European Commission might not always see the financing of social services as an investment that yields a later return, as this can lead to national authorities investing less in this area. MEPs echoed this at our 27 May webinar.





Vulnerable populations and key social issues addressed in NRRPs.

Population/ Social Issues Covered		Unemployment	Poverty	Homelessness	Long-term care	Social services workforce	Digitalisation of social services	Child protection	Older people	Children and families	Youth	Persons with disabilities	Persons with mental health issues	Refugees and migrants
1.	Austria*	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗
2.	Belgium*	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3.	Chechia	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗
4.	Denmark*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5.	Estonia*	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗
6.	Finland*	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗
7.	France*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗
8.	Germany*	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗
9.	Greece	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗
10.	Ireland*	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
11.	Italy*	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗
12.	Latvia*	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗
13.	Poland	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗
14.	Romania*	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗
15.	Slovakia*	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗
16.	Slovenia*	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓
17.	Spain*	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓
18.	Sweden*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓

\* Answers based on final NRRPs, submitted to the EC

The table above illustrates the main social challenges and vulnerable populations covered and not covered in the individual NRRPs. This overview shows that unemployment is addressed in all NRRPs while investments in digitalisation -including social services digitalisation- are covered in most NRRPs, too. However, other themes, equally relevant to achieving the objectives of the EPSR, such as child protection, social care strategies for older adults, and investment in the workforce, are less prominent across most countries. It will be important to assess whether these omissions are due to these policies already being addressed through other means. Should this not be the case, it will be important to look at ways of addressing them in the assessment of the NRRPs to advance Europe's social recovery.

## II. INVOLVEMENT IN THE NRRPS

According to the data collected, the level of involvement of administrations with responsibility for social services in the development of the NRRPs varied significantly from country to country. Also, within countries, members have had unequal opportunities to participate in the drafting of the NRRPs. However, we have been able to identify key challenges faced by most respondents.

### a. Authorities responsible for preparing the NRRPs

In most countries, the creation of the NRRPs was the responsibility of the Ministry of Finance, sometimes in cooperation with other ministries, and less frequently, it has been the outcome of a joint project of specially established committees. In some countries, the government worked closely with parliaments from the beginning of the process, but most often, parliament could only approve the final NRRP. However, in several Member States, the relevant stakeholders were not informed at all about the authorities in charge of the development of the NRRPs or encountered significant difficulties in finding relevant information.

### b. Public consultations

In most countries, public consultations on the content of the NRRPs took place, but these were held at different stages of the Plans' development and thus, the opportunities to influence the final shape of the documents differed significantly.

Some respondents were able to provide recommendations for the Plan and these were taken into account, at least to a certain extent, in the development of the final NRRP (AT, BE, DK, EL, ES, FI). However, there were situations of no clear indications that participants' comments were taken into consideration (DE, IE, IT, LV, SK). Finally, a third group of respondents indicated that either no public consultation was held by their national governments or that the consultations did not include relevant stakeholders in social services (CZ, EE, HR, PL, RO, SE, SI).

Where consultations took place, they concerned the economic and social effects of the

Covid-19 crisis, the economic and social impact of the investments planned under the NRRPs, and the possible consequences of green and digital transitions. Just one respondent highlighted that the consultation also referred to the impact of investment on the implementation of the EPSR Action Plan.

### c. Submission of projects

Many NRRPs are designed as a collection of projects that will be funded through the recovery funds. However, only in three cases authorities responsible for social services acknowledged that they had an opportunity to send their projects (FI, IT, ES). In one Member State, relevant stakeholders decided to submit their projects to the government out of their own initiative but did not get any feedback (RO).



## III. EU FUNDS MANAGEMENT

Effective accessing, managing and accounting European funds is crucial for the realisation both of various EU programmes objectives and national development strategies. However, Member States have long faced many challenges in this area. The following analysis maps basic issues experienced by beneficiaries of European funding support in the past, and their views on whether they foresee encountering similar problems with the recovery funds.

### a. Experienced challenges

Most respondents point to at least four key challenges. To start with, the respondents indicated an overly complicated and bureaucratic system of granting and auditing funds, the long process of publicly procuring or contracting to ensure the implementation of the funds (which may take up to a year), and frequent changes of documentation in the application and implementation processes (FR, BE, DE, DK, ES, GR, IT, LV, PL, RO, SE, SK).

From the perspective of organisations bringing together care providers, the need to make their own contribution to financing projects is usually the biggest barrier to participation in social service programmes funded by EU funds (CZ, DE, FR).

Monitoring and control procedures require the establishment of strong accounting and finance procedures that sometimes deter from the objective or outcome of the programme and instead, the implementer focuses on financial justification procedures. Respondents indicate that in many programmes, there seems to be a focus on formal requirements rather than flexibility to achieve results in real life (LV, RO).

Another recurrent issue is the perceived lack of synergies between different EU projects and insufficient knowledge regarding various funding sources. Several respondents stressed, in this context, the necessity to have professional knowledge or hire an expert to deal with funding procedures (ES, IE, IT, LV, PL, RO, SK).

Other issues raised include the requirement to spend the money within a certain timeframe, as access to funds is often possible if funding from the previous period has been spent (RO); narrowly defined target groups (EE, PL); exclusion of certain categories of beneficiaries from the possibility to apply for funds (e.g., municipalities in HR) and finally, the lack of tools to measure the impact of projects (EL).



## b. Anticipated challenges

The primary difficulty reported by respondents in managing the recovery funds is the continuing lack of clear information on how funds will be allocated and distributed. This makes it problematic to make a clear prediction about possible challenges. However, several potential issues have been already pointed out.

First, it has been highlighted that in numerous Member States, communication concerning the recovery funds was complicated because the process has been running in parallel with the preparation of the Partnership Agreement for 2021-27 and each of these Plans may be developed by different ministries. For many regional authorities and third sector organisations, the distinctiveness of the two processes is not clear.

Second, the implementation of the NRRPs may be further hampered as relevant stakeholders are still not informed about the details of the proposed planned reforms while the time-frame for the use of recovery funds is very ambitious. It has also been highlighted that it will be crucial to ensure synergies between different funding sources, especially when certain activities can only be financed by a specific fund. This also applies when projects are to cover target groups that are not directly addressed in the NRRPs and can be supported under other programmes. For example, the NRRPs address policy reforms while population groups programmes are covered by other sources of funding such as the ESF.

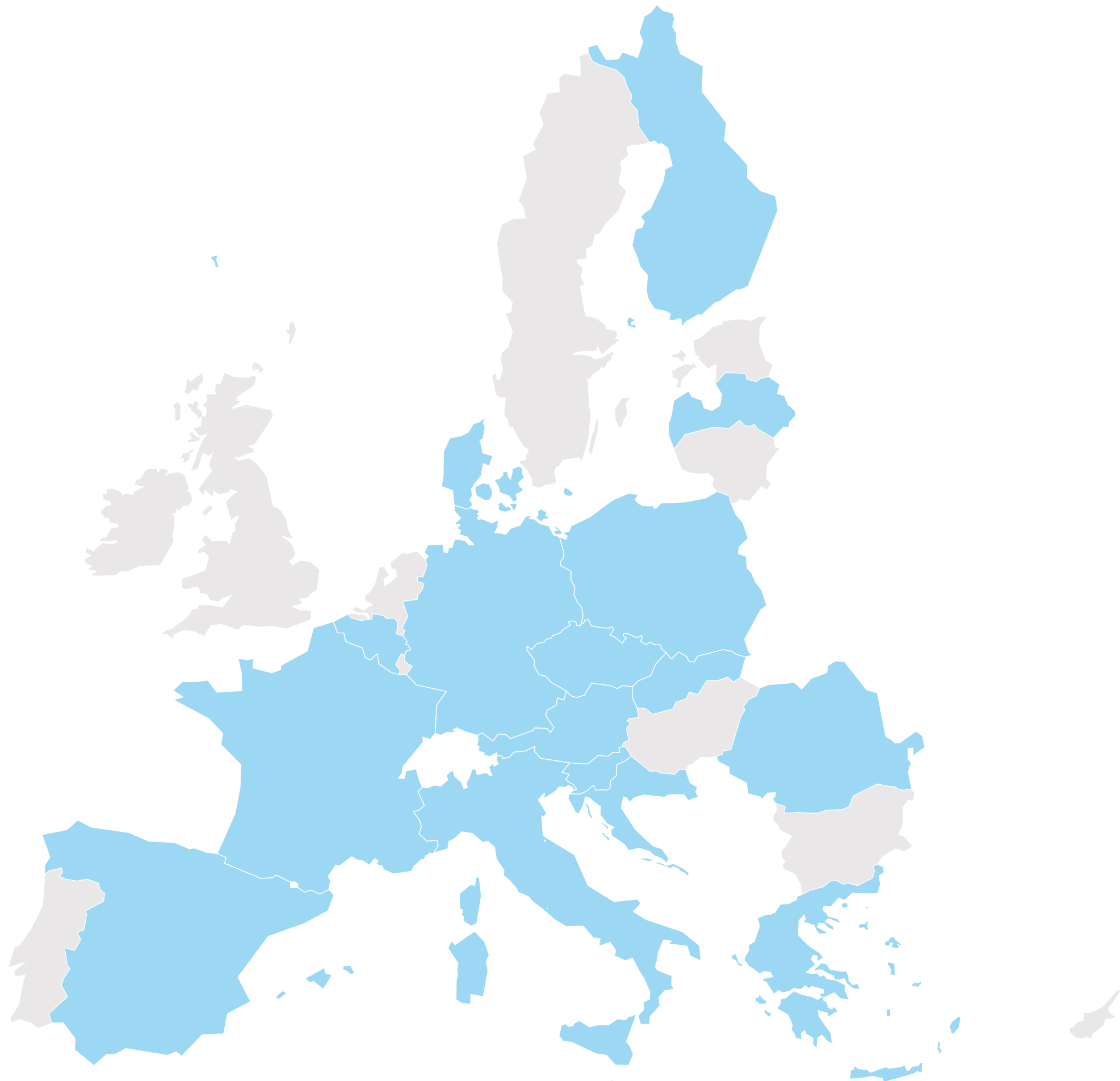
Third, the categories of potential beneficiaries of the recovery funds are not yet known in many countries. It has not been established yet in several countries whether investments will be implemented at national level, or whether regional authorities will also have access to resources and will enjoy certain autonomy in determining how to disburse them to meet the overall objectives of the Plans (HR, SK).

Finally, not all expenditure is eligible for funding. This includes regular recurrent costs that may represent 7-8% of investments or funds needed to purchase equipment. In consequence, implementation of some projects requires involving additional resources from the beneficiaries, which, as it has been highlighted, can be a major problem, particularly for smaller recipients of the funds.

The European Commission has introduced several measures to facilitate the management of European funds. There is confusion as to whether these apply to all funds or just structural funds. Respondents expressed high hopes for implementation of simplified cost options (AT, BE, DK, IT, LV, PL, RO, SE) and the single audit principle (AT, BE, CZ, IT, PL, RO, SE, SK). Furthermore, joint action plans, in view of many respondents, could greatly improve the funds' management (BE, EL, ES, IT, PL, SE). The importance of a more stable legislative framework for achieving the objectives of EU programmes was also repeatedly stressed (EL, IT, PL, RO). However, in the opinion of most respondents, the key facilitator for the effective use of European funds would be to implement more flexible programmes (AT, CZ, EE, ES, IT, LV, PL, RO, SE, SK).



# COUNTRY PROFILES





# AUSTRIA



## Social Services Focus in the NRRP

The total amount of the Austrian Plan is about 4.5 billion EUR. This amount does not include loans via the RRF, as Austria decided not to apply for those. 779 million EUR, meaning 17.2 % of the RRF is dedicated to fostering social inclusion and improvement of primary health care. Another 160 million EUR will be invested in digitalising education.

Social inclusion measures within the Plan include:

- Fighting Energy Poverty (50 million EUR / 1.1 % of total)
- Providing Digital Devices for Students (171.7 million EUR / 3.8 % of total)
- Financing Re-skilling and training (277 million EUR / 6.2 % of total)
- Additional lessons for marginalised students, compensating education deficits accumulated during the Covid-19 crisis (101 million EUR / 2.2 % of total)
- Promoting the establishment of Primary Care Units (100 million EUR / 2.2 % of total)
- Development of an electronic Mother-Child Pass so that public early child support services can have better monitoring of data related to pregnant women and newborn children (10 million EUR / 0.2 % of total)
- National roll-out of 'early child support' for socially disadvantaged pregnant women, their children and families (15 million EUR / 0.3 % of total)
- Investment in the implementation of Community Nursing (54.2 million EUR / 1.2 % of total).

Regarding the targeted issues and groups, the Austrian NRRP addresses unemployment, poverty and long-term care. Specific target groups of the social measures of the NRPP are older people as well as children, youth, families and minimum income beneficiaries.

However, people with disabilities, homeless people, and persons living with mental health issues are not addressed by the Plan.

## Involvement in the NRRP

The government opened a public consultation until Friday 26 February 2021 and, in line with EU requirements, it was addressed to local and regional authorities, social partners, civil society organisations, youth organisations and other relevant stakeholders.

The Austrian Association of Cities participated in the process and made a proposal for an investment programme that could be financed by the Austrian NRRP budget on 22 February. The City of Vienna provided input to those recommendations as well. Among others, the Association of Cities recommended investments in increasing the formal care workforce; create new and renovate existing childcare facilities such as kindergartens; digitalisation of the education system by connecting schools to the fibre network and expanding WIFI availability in schools; as well as employment schemes for the long-term unemployed. Other recommendations included policy reforms to foster investments in social housing.

The Plan, published on 30 April, did not include several elements of the proposal made by local administrations and organisations. The final outcome has been a compromised one. For instance, although there will not be investments in the care workforce in general, the Plan covers

community nursing and care prevention. The proposal for investment in child care facilities was also considered because the Plan provides for investment in additional high-quality child care spaces.

By announcing a Corona-Job-Initiative, the Austrian government, took also into account the proposed investment in job placements of the long-term unemployed, as the initiative will finance re-skilling and training activities for the unemployed. In addition, the Plan's initiative on the circular economy will create employment schemes in non-profit organisations, which will also be available to the long-term unemployed.

## EU Funds Management

Respondents from Vienna City Council highlighted that the programme funded with EU funds should allow for simplified cost options, more flexibility, and compliance with the single audit principle.



# BELGIUM



## Social Services Focus in the NRRP

The Belgian NRRP addresses many major social issues, including unemployment and poverty and it provides for support for key vulnerable populations, including older people, children and families, youth, persons with disabilities and mental health issues, and refugees and migrants.

There are also planned investments in digitalisation of social services. The Plan envisages large investments in housing in general, and housing renovation in particular, which should benefit those facing energy poverty and homelessness.

However, there are several significant areas, which are missing. These include long-term care reforms and the development of child protection strategies.

## Involvement in the NRRP

The Belgian NRRP was prepared by the federal government based on inputs from Wallonia and Flanders regional authorities. SPP Integration Sociale was consulted on the economic and social effects of the Covid-19 crisis and was involved in the social impact analysis of the NRRP and its contribution towards the achievement of the EPSR Action Plan's objectives.

Furthermore, SPP Integration Sociale was involved in the establishment of a dedicated incubator to finance and develop sustainable digital inclusion initiatives at federal level.

## EU Funds Management

Although European funds encourage reforms in the social services sector, excessive administrative burdens often prevent stakeholders from making effective and full use of the available resources. Simplified cost options, joint action plans and single audit principle would certainly facilitate the process of applying for and managing programmes funded with EU funds.



# CROATIA



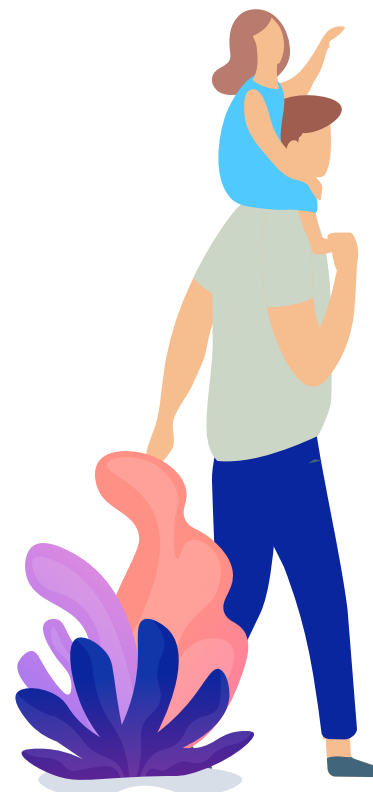
## Social Services Focus in the NRRP

The Croatian Plan provides for certain investments in the area of social services. Funding will be available for digitalisation of social services, increasing transparency and adequacy of social benefits and digitalisation of the social benefits' system, development of community services to prevent institutionalisation (including the introduction of a strategic framework for comprehensive and accessible care and the construction of support services for older people), development of social mentoring services and strengthening the capacity of social services' professionals to provide services in the community

However, based on the current provisions of the Plan, it is not possible to estimate the amount of funding that will be allocated to these social objectives.

## Involvement in the NRRP

Zagreb City Council was not invited in the preparatory work on the NRRP and it was not informed of its progress or the authorities responsible for preparing the Plan.



# CZECHIA



## Social Services Focus in the NRRP

The Plan covers several crucial social issues, such as unemployment, long-term care reform and digitalisation of public administration (which may include social services), affordable childcare and addressing inequality. It is stated in the Plan that there will also be support for children and families, youth and women.

However, there are many missing themes related to social inclusion, including the eradication of poverty, shortage of social services workforce, and preventing homelessness. The Plan does not include either support for persons with disabilities, persons with mental health issues, refugees and migrants and low-skilled persons.

## Involvement in the NRRP

The Ministry of Industry and Trade, in cooperation with the Ministry of Finance and other government departments, were responsible for preparing the NRRP.

The Association of Social Care Providers is represented in a joint body of government representatives, employers and trade unions, the so-called tripartite, but the NRRP was prepared without the involvement of this body.

## EU Funds Management

From the perspective of organisations bringing together care providers, the need to make their own contribution to financing projects is usually the biggest barrier to participation in social service programmes funded by EU funds. More flexible programmes and the single audit principle would facilitate administration issues in the use of EU funds.





# DENMARK



## Social Services Focus in the NRRP

The Danish Plan covers most social issues, including unemployment, homelessness, long-term care reforms and digitalisation of social services. Additionally, the NRRP prioritises mental health and wellbeing, and it targets social inequalities in access to health services and education.

Two areas missing, however, seem to be investments in social services' workforce and child protection alongside support for young people leaving the care system.

The Plan includes certain descriptions of the government's social efforts, including their fight against poverty, although in general, the NRRP focuses more on the green transition (including green investments in social housing) and digitalisation. Nonetheless, the Plan foresees investments in support for the most vulnerable populations and the planned allocation of resources was assessed as sufficient by the respondent.

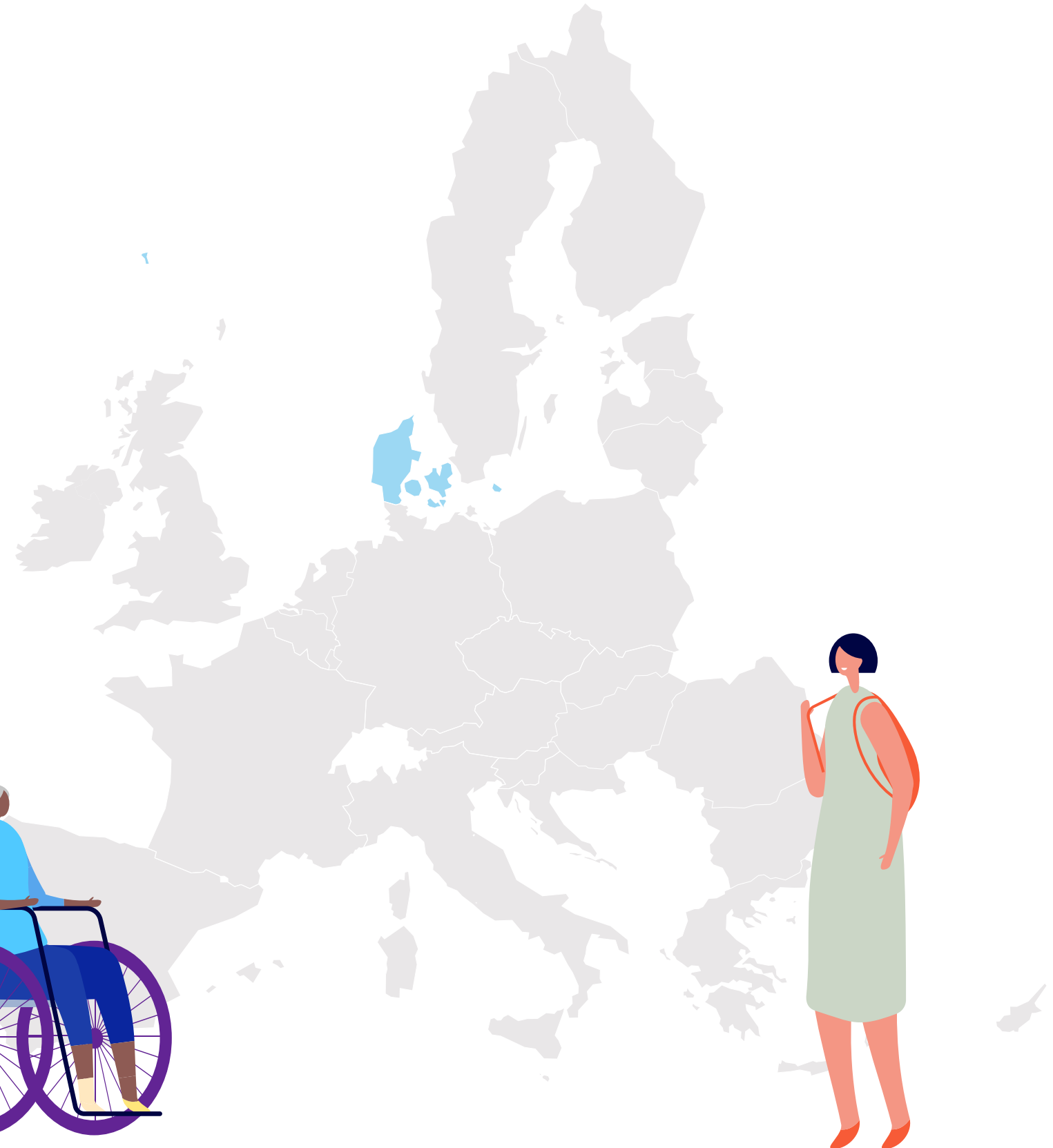
## Involvement in the NRRP

The Ministry of Finance was responsible for creating the NRRP. In general, there was broad public consultation and the Plan is based on the input from social partners.

As highlighted in the Plan, "the Danish RRP consists of components made in agreements between the government and a broad majority of the Danish parliament. Stakeholders have been consulted during the preparatory process through each individual component – especially in relation to the recommendations of the climate partnership and the green restart teams" in line with the Plan focus on green investments.

## EU Funds Management

The primary barrier in accessing EU funds is their very comprehensive application process. Completing the process correctly and demonstrate compliance with all requirements requires the knowledge of professionals with experience in the application process and use of these funds. The subsequent stages of managing the funds are also excessively bureaucratic. Focus on simplified cost options would facilitate the process and increase efficiency in the use of EU funds.



# ESTONIA



## Social Services Focus in the NRRP

The NRRP does not clearly indicate what share of the funds will be allocated for social services. However, the respondents highlight that even large investments in inclusion can be insufficient if funds are not spent thoughtfully with a clear vision of the desired outcomes.

The Plan addresses the problem of unemployment and envisages reforms of long-term care. However, most of the significant social challenges facing Estonia are not addressed. These include poverty (in particular the situation of families caring for dependent persons); the shortages and underfunding of the social services workforce; digitalisation of social services, including the integration of health and social services.

With regards to vulnerable populations, the Plan envisages funding for supporting older people, children and families, persons with disabilities and persons living with mental health issues. However, what is particularly missing is a strategy for combating alcohol and drug addiction. There is also no support envisaged for young people not in training, education and employment.

## Involvement in the NRRP

The respondents were not aware about the authorities who were responsible for drafting the NRRP and they did not have an opportunity to submit their projects for the Plan or to participate in any public consultation regarding the Plan's content.

## EU Funds Management

According to the respondents, the way the funds target population groups is often problematic. Many promotion and prevention projects are targeted at younger working-age populations (up to the age of 64) while older people are mainly targeted just by intervention-focused and social welfare projects. There is a need for European funds to implement more flexible and integrated programmes.



# FINLAND



## Social Services Focus in the NRRP

Respondents highlight that the Finnish NRRP adequately addresses the majority of pressing social issues. According to the Plan, the activities under the NRRP will contribute to the reform of employment services, health and social services, and services for continuous learning, making them more effective and improving their quality. Productivity and service accessibility will be improved through digitalisation funding of around 540 million EUR.

The Plan addresses the issues of unemployment, social services workforce, digitalisation of public services, including social services, as well as support for children and families, youth and persons living with mental health issues. However, there are a number of social inclusion related areas that are also missing, such as engaging excluded groups in the digitisation process, support for victims of abuse, support for migrant and refugees, homelessness prevention, a poverty eradication strategy and child protection with support for youth leaving care.

## Involvement in the NRRP

The Ministry of Finance was responsible for putting together a specially designated coordination group under their responsibility. The group also included a high-level representative from the Ministry of Social Affairs.

Regional authorities and third sector representatives were invited to submit their projects for the NRRP. Resources from the RFF may be used, among others, for developments and innovations in social and health care.

## EU Funds Management

*No answer*



# FRANCE



## Social Services Focus in the NRRP

The essential aspects of the proposed Plan revolve around healthcare and employment. As an example, 26 actions focus on them, while only one action concerns the employment of people with disabilities and one relates to families in vulnerable situations, whilst two actions address poverty. Actions concentrate funding mostly on financing facilities. Nonetheless, the Plan highlights that through these actions, at least 13 out of the 20 principles of the EPSR are covered in the Plan.

The health crisis has revealed the impact of the lack of social links within the country, but this is not addressed in the Plan. County councils and local authorities in cooperation with third sector organisations are best placed to improve social inclusion. Their work is crucial to create and support social relationships, which represent the basis of prevention and promotion approaches, which are being neglected in public policies. For instance, a recent questionnaire on decentralisation and child protection identified that of the 88 county councils that responded, just 35% have put in place prevention approaches.

Prevention is not addressed in the Plan despite the current health crisis showing the importance of a cohesive society to respond to the social determinants of health problems and the need to work on the link between generations. The need to address prevention and integrated approaches is all the most pressing taking into account the segmentation of public policies in the current French system.

Therefore, ESN members underline that the national government should establish formal cooperation agreements with the competent

authorities in regions, county councils and municipalities to ensure that the Plan's implementation is effective.

As for specific population groups and themes, child protection, violence against women and children, older people with dependency needs, the inclusion of people living with a disability or those with mental health problems are not covered in the Plan. Therefore, our members advise that the government includes in the Plan a specific focus on investment in these population groups.

## Involvement in the NRRP

The Plan has been piloted by the government through an inter-ministerial group at national level without the participation of stakeholders working in social services.

## EU Funds Management

Members mentioned a series of issues impacting negatively the use of EU funding, including cumbersome processes that involve additional costs for the beneficiaries; for instance, when the beneficiary needs to advance the money, which prevents organisations with modest means from applying. They also highlighted lack of clarity regarding the process for launching and awarding EU funding. Furthermore, monitoring and control procedures require the establishment of strong accounting and finance procedures that sometimes deter from the objective of the programme in order to focus instead on justification of funding procedures. Finally, the extent of monitoring may pose a risk to the beneficiary of a partial refusal of payment at the end of the action, which might also prevent organisations from applying.

Members highlight the need for simplified cost options, joint action plans, a stable framework that allows organisations to be more flexible in the implementation of programmes and the single audit principle as ways to improve EU funds management.





# GERMANY



## Social Services Focus in the NRRP

The total amount of the German Plan is about 28 billion EUR. 1.3 billion EUR, meaning 4.5% of the RRF is dedicated to fostering social inclusion. Another 1.4 billion EUR will be invested in digitalising education to improve remote teaching. 3.8 billion EUR will be invested in building a resilient public health system, i.e. through digitalising work procedures in health authorities and hospitals, modernising emergency care services and reinforcing health infrastructure at regional level. Another 3 billion EUR will be invested in digitalising public administration.

More specifically, social inclusion measures include:

- 58% of social inclusion resources invested in maintaining vocational training for young people.
- 40% of social inclusion resources invested in building or renovating childcare facilities.
- 3% of social inclusion resources invested in a digital tool for citizens to calculate their pension entitlements.

The social inclusion measures promoted by the Plan, are mainly aimed at improving participation in the labour market, promoting wage growth in line with productivity development, and ensuring the feasibility of pensions. Measures such as the short-time work allowance from the Bundesagentur für Arbeit (BA) [Federal Employment Agency], suitable and necessary to cushion the economic and social consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, cannot alone strengthen social inclusion. In addition, the following social measures are foreseen:

- Single parents will receive a tax cut of 4,008 EUR, to compensate for the lack of childcare support due to the closure of schools

and kindergartens during the pandemic.

- For a limited amount of time, people depending on the public minimum income scheme (Grundsicherung) will have easier access to financial and housing support.
- Parents have received a one-off allowance of 300 EUR per child in 2020, and will receive an additional allowance of 150 EUR in 2021.
- Students with educational gaps due to the pandemic will receive additional support.

The child bonus of 300 EUR in 2020 and 150 EUR in 2021 will not be deducted from social benefits, so vulnerable families can equally benefit from this measure.

The resources made available for social inclusion will be used to refinance measures that are already in place and would have been otherwise financed by national programmes. Therefore, the Plan is not creating additional incentives for recovery as initially foreseen by the Commission guideline.

The investment programme for childcare (Child Day Care Quality and Participation Improvement Act) is limited in duration, despite the need for long-term perspectives and support according to the needs of families.

Social services are not sufficiently addressed by the Plan. Less than five per cent of the total sum mentioned in the Plan is allocated to strengthening social inclusion. This does not do justice to the importance of this area and should be adjusted. Welfare and voluntary social work organisations, which played an essential role in ensuring social inclusion and a functioning community during the pandemic, are not mentioned in the German Recovery and Resilience Plan.

Population groups that have been hit hard by the crisis are not addressed in the Plan, includ-

ing people that depend on long-term care, especially those living in care homes. Resources should be allocated to the long-term care sector, i.e. to continue building a care system based in the community.

- Germany will invest 3 billion EUR in digitalisation of its public administration. Although social services are not explicitly mentioned, this investment is available to all public services and should be used to help digitalising the social and health care sectors. Indeed, there is a lack of digital equipment for day-care centres and childcare facilities, where providers are to a great extent inadequately equipped with appropriate hardware and software and lacking training. This has become clear in the current crisis and applies especially to small providers and self-organised child care groups.

## Involvement in the NRRP

The German Federal Ministry of Finance led the process of drafting the German Recovery and Resilience Plan, in coordination with the Federal Chancellery, the responsible ministries and the German Bundestag as well as the Federal states. The German Plan was released in December 2020.

Social partners (for instance, the trade union DGB) had meetings with the finance ministry during this process, but as far as our German members report, their arguments were not represented in the Plan. Local authorities were not involved in the drafting of the Plan, which is regretted by the German Association of Counties.

On 5 February 2021, the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs asked for opinions on the German Recovery and Resilience Plan,

<sup>3</sup> Statement DV 5/2021 of 19 February 2021.

which was adopted by the Federal Government on 16 December 2020. On 19 February 2021, Deutscher Verein, representing public social authorities and the third sector social service providers, participated in this consultation<sup>3</sup>.

On 27 April, the final Plan of the German Government was released. Besides additional support for students, the social inclusion part remained nearly unchanged, thus not taking into account feedback from the consultation with social organisations. A more transparent process and consultation of social partners and other social stakeholders at an earlier stage might have strengthened the social dimension of the Plan.

## EU Funds Management

The reporting requirements and paperwork in EU projects are rather complex. Finding adequate project partners can also be difficult. The co-financing rates are often a barrier to participation for many organisations.



# GREECE



## Social Services Focus in the NRRP

The Strategic Guidelines of the Hellenic National Recovery and Resilience Plan place much weight on addressing the problem of changing the productive model of the economy. However, it does not approach in a balanced manner two other crucial challenges – adopting a new development model for social policy and addressing the country's ageing issue.

The third NRRP Pillar 'Employment, skills and social cohesion', includes a sub-section on social welfare. This section aims to enhancing the economic and social inclusion of vulnerable populations, promoting equality of opportunities and supporting diversity. The inclusion of these priorities in the Plan is welcome.

There are also a few initiatives related to social services targeted towards persons and families at high risk of poverty and social exclusion. In this regard, the Plan addresses (a) social benefits improvement; (b) reform of early childhood care, including special interventions for children with disabilities, cognitive and developmental disorders; (c) enhancement of structures providing social assistance services and the promotion of actions targeted towards labour market (re)integration of the most vulnerable population groups; (d) digital transformation of the social protection system; and (e) diversity training in both the public and private sectors to fight discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, nationality and other characteristics".

The overall targets of these actions are to:

1. Ensure the social inclusion of vulnerable population groups by means of (a) promoting economic activation, through the provision of training, education, and apprenticeship opportunities; and (b) ensuring access

to effective and high-quality social services.

2. Reduce poverty, inequality, and the risk of social and economic exclusion through the provision of effective safety nets, comprising of new and updated quality social services.
3. Put in place early childhood interventions to secure children and young families' potential and economic/social prospect.

However, there are also several missing themes, including homelessness, long-term care reforms, addressing changes in the demographic structure of society, dependency of welfare beneficiaries, social exclusion of migrants and persons with an ethnic background (Roma population). This is the case particularly in terms of access to education, employment, housing, health and social services and support for persons with high residence costs (due to the lack of any social housing framework) and persons facing over-indebtedness.

## Involvement in the NRRP

The draft Greek NRRP was drafted in June – October 2020 by a special Committee chaired by the Deputy Minister of Finance. It took into account key recommendations submitted by a group tasked by the Greek Prime Minister in June 2020 with developing a plan for sustainable economic growth in Greece.

The Deputy Minister of Finance submitted on 25 November 2020 a strategic version of the draft NRRP to the official public consultation site [www.open.gov](http://www.open.gov). The consultation process ended on 20 December 2020 and received 45 comments submitted by different stakeholders, including local authorities, civil society, and academia. The Minister of Finance published a synthesis report in March 2021.

## EU Funds Management

A significant proportion of European funds is allocated to social objectives, but their effectiveness is hampered by an overly bureaucratic management system and a lack of tools to measure the impact of projects on promoting inclusive growth targets. Respondents expressed the hope that joint action plans and a more stable legislative framework will help to overcome these difficulties.



# IRELAND



## Social Services Focus in the NRRP

The Irish NRRP places very little emphasis on social services. Relevant objectives are mentioned in Priority 3 and relate only to housing, health care and pensions. However, even these references are not comprehensive enough. The Plan fails to take account of the impact that Covid19 has had on social services, in terms of increased reliance on health and welfare services or the impact of the pandemic on staff. The emphasis in the Plan is on employment and industry, and while everyone is aware of the impact of Covid-19 on the economy, there have certainly been social impacts as well, such as the depletion of care resources.

The Plan does not directly address any key social challenges or provide support for specific vulnerable populations. The Plan also does not contain any strategy for combating social inequalities. What is particularly missing from the Plan, given the context of Irish society, is support for:

- persons with mental health issues - the Plan does not capture this huge impact that the pandemic has had on the mental health of the population and the resultant increase in need for mental health services, which are already under-resourced;
- women – during the pandemic, women disproportionately took on care tasks, especially in the context of childcare and school closures, which was raised as a potential threat to the progress made in recent decades on equal opportunities in the workplace. Due to constraints in maternity hospitals, women had to give birth alone and sometimes received devastating news deprived of support from loved ones. Job losses were particularly high in sectors that

traditionally employ more women. There was an increase in contacts with Women's Aid (an organisation working with women experiencing domestic violence). The likely economic and mental health impacts on women have not been considered in the Irish plan.

- homeless persons – a group which was particularly affected by the pandemic.

Comprehensive support strategies for older people, children and families, youth, persons with disabilities, refugees and migrant and Irish Travellers are also missing. The plan also fails to tackle poverty, reform the long-term care system and child protection system, and support for the social services' workforce.

It should be noted that public services in Ireland have made strides towards greater digitalisation over the past few years, with varying degrees of success. The Plan does not appear to focus on contributing to that process.

## Involvement in the NRRP

The Irish NRRP was prepared by the Department of the Taoiseach. The Plan draws heavily on existing government programmes and presents few new approaches to social services. Many of the proposed measures are in fact part of pre-covid policies, as is the case with the housing strategy.

The short (20 day) comment period for the Plan ran from 2 February 2021 to 22 February 2021. According to the respondent it was poorly advertised, and as a result public opinion was not aware that this process had taken place. Although the submission of projects was encouraged, this invitation was primarily aimed at business and enterprise.

## EU Funds Management

The respondents stressed that efficient management of European funds would require better access to information and less use of jargon terms in communication with fund recipients. The changes proposed by the European Commission (such as simplified cost options or joint actions plans) are worded too vaguely to allow a clear assessment of whether they will improve the ease of applying for, spending and accounting for EU funds. In particular, the respondents stressed that there is a need for more guidance on the process of applying for funds.





# ITALY



## Social Services Focus in the NRRP

Questionnaire respondents from local and regional authorities pointed out that social inclusion issues are not adequately addressed in the Plan and when mentioned, they are often too general. Lazio Region stated that more investments for addressing social problems are needed, especially for social services facilities.

The Plan addresses numerous social issues, including unemployment, poverty, homelessness, child protection and support in transition to adulthood for youth leaving care, long-term care reforms, digitalisation (mostly within the health sector) and community care.

There are also separate objectives regarding urban regeneration aimed at combatting marginalisation and social degradation. This will be accompanied by comprehensive investments in social housing and other social cohesion measures.

However, respondents also pointed out that the Plan does not address adequately educational poverty, social services' infrastructure, social services digitalisation, local welfare system development and workforce development.

Respondents highlighted that the population groups covered by the Plan are youth, children and families, persons with disabilities, older people, homeless and women. With regard to the latter, the Plan aims to promote women's participation in the labour market and correct asymmetries that hamper equal opportunities from school age, including disproportionate care workload and transport exclusion.

However, they also underlined that children, despite mentioned, will not be adequately sup-

ported with the resources foreseen in the Plan. The same can be said of people at risk of exclusion, refugees, migrants and prisoners.

The Plan foresees 25.42 billion EUR dedicated to social inclusion and cohesion out of 235.12 billion EUR of total investments.

## Involvement in the NRRP

The authority responsible for the Plan in Italy has been the Prime Minister's Office, including the Department for European Policies, with a strong role in support and coordination by several Ministries, starting with the Ministry for Economy and Finance.

The national government formally consulted Italian regions according to foreseen constitutional procedures. However, regions highlighted that consultation did not take place in a structured way and were not really involved in the creation of the NRRP.

Lazio Region explained that a regular conference between the National Government and the Regions had been held to discuss social themes of shared responsibility. The National Government requested that the regions submitted projects to be included in the Plan. For example, the Lazio Region explained that they organised their own working group on the Recovery Plan to come up with the projects to be included within the national Plan. However, respondents from consortiums of municipalities were not involved in the creation of the Plan and stated to be only partially aware of how the Plan was being developed and who was responsible for the process.

## EU Funds Management

The main barriers in accessing EU funds identified by the respondents were the lack of knowledge of the various types of funds and how to access them, the lack of adequate skills of professionals to manage the administration and financial requirements related to the funds, internal governance issues, the lack of effective simplification measures and excess of administrative burden in the management, control and certification system and excessive production of delegated acts by the European Commission.

The respondents suggested that simplified cost options, joint action plans, more flexible programme, more attention to local needs and issues, and more stable legislative framework would contribute towards a more effective management of EU Funds.







## Social Services Focus in the NRRP

The NRRP states that within the component 'Reduction of inequality', 20% of total funding or 330 million EUR, will be invested for this purpose. However, it should be noted that not all this funding will be invested in social inclusion.

Although initial investment in the social sector was to be substantial, in subsequent drafts of the Plan funding was gradually reduced. After criticism of such decisions made by NGOs and representatives of the EC, a new activity was included – the development of new long-term care services close to families. Initially, 15 million EUR had been planned, but after changes financing was increased by 64.9 million EUR. The aim is to create new care places close to families for at least 850 older people. This is the largest investment for the development of social services within the Plan.

This means that there is little attention given to investment in existing social services, even though social services, especially social care, have proved to be an essential service during the emergency brought about by Covid-19. In the initial version of the Plan, an expenditure of 11.5 million EUR had been planned. However, this idea was not supported by representatives of the European Commission, as representatives of the Ministry of Welfare explained to Riga officials.

Therefore, planned investments have been reviewed in accordance with EC proposals on linking investments to the deinstitutionalisation strategy. Hence all funding available for the development of long-term care services is directed to the creation of new family-type care places in municipalities without investing in existing long-term care institutions.

Two reforms are envisaged under the component 'Reduction of inequality': the administrative-territorial reform and the promotion of access to social and employment services. It can be concluded that in the Plan the problem of social inequality, which is very topical for Latvia, is reduced to these two directions. However, it is difficult to see something fundamentally new and innovative in employment promotion measures, such as a radical change in the approach of the State Employment Agency, focusing on a customer-oriented approach.

The Plan devotes quite a lot of space to the reform of raising the minimum income, but it must be acknowledged that this reform had already been prepared and needs to be implemented independently of the Plan.

The Plan covers support for older people and persons with disabilities as well as issues related to unemployment, poverty, long-term care reform and social services digitalisation. However, there are several missing themes, including support for youth with behavioural problems and those experiencing domestic violence. Despite Covid-19 having led to an increase in the numbers of young people with mental health problems and a rise in domestic abuse, these issues are not addressed in the NRRP. In fact, domestic violence, in general, has become a particularly acute problem during Covid, but the Plan does not address it.

The Plan does not address either the problem of homelessness, and the lack of digital skills of vulnerable populations. Furthermore, support for unemployed persons with disabilities is also missing. Persons with disabilities are mentioned only in the context of buildings accessibility. The Plan does not include investments in the improvement of social services facilities and living environments for those in need nor strengthening the capacity of social service providers, including workforce training and de-

velopment, support, new work methodologies, and accreditation. Finally, there is no emphasis on the social groups at risk of social inequality - single older people, single-parent families, or the long-term unemployed, and the homeless are not mentioned in the Plan as highlighted above.

## Involvement in the NRRP

The Ministry of Finance, in cooperation with the Ministry of Welfare, was responsible for creating the Plan. While initially there was not any foreseen consultation, due to lack of satisfaction of municipal authorities, a public hearing was held. However, the details of how the Plan was created were not available, nor could local authorities submit their own projects.

Moving forward, the EU should require more visible involvement of stakeholders (municipalities, social services providers, professional associations, representatives of people using services) in the planning process of EU funds in the early stage of their development. This involves discussing initial ideas in addition to commenting draft papers.

## EU Funds Management

Despite promising changes in simplified cost options and flexibility of programmes to improve management, there are several barriers to accessing EU funds.

The reporting system is still seen as too bureaucratic, with oversight by agencies whose primary objective is to oversee the process but are not always responsible for the actual outcome. There seems to be a focus on formal requirements rather than flexibility to achieve results in real life.

Likewise, there seems to be a lack of synergies between different EU projects, which eventually may prevent beneficiaries from accessing support from different funding strands.



# POLAND



## Social Services Focus in the NRRP

The challenges facing social services after the pandemic are not well addressed in the Polish NRRP. As a result of Covid-19, there has been a significant increase in the number of people seeking support from social welfare services. However, the Plan does not include support for organisations providing social and inclusion support services for people at risk of exclusion. The Plan does not devote funds towards local authorities, although they are primarily responsible for the implementation of social policy objectives. Neither are non-governmental organisations included in the distribution of funds.

The Plan includes the objective “to even out disparities in socio-economic development”, but there is no description of specific actions and target groups to be supported in this respect. As an example, the Plan places great emphasis on digitalisation and new technologies. However, it does not take into account the needs of the most vulnerable groups with regards to their digital skills and the need to address the digital exclusion of older people, poor people, people living in rural areas and people in care facilities.

With regards to social inclusion relevant thematic areas, the Plan addresses the problem of unemployment and certain challenges faced by older people from a healthcare perspective, and children from an education angle. This means that many vulnerable groups have not been covered by the Plan. These include persons with disabilities, persons living with mental health issues, refugees and migrants, persons dependent on social welfare, young people and families from vulnerable backgrounds and persons in institutional care.

Other social issues missing in the Plan are poverty, homelessness, long-term care reforms, the social services workforce, digitalisation of social services, child protection and support in the transition to adulthood for youth leaving care, as well as coordination between various agencies/services providing social support and community care.

## Involvement in the NRRP

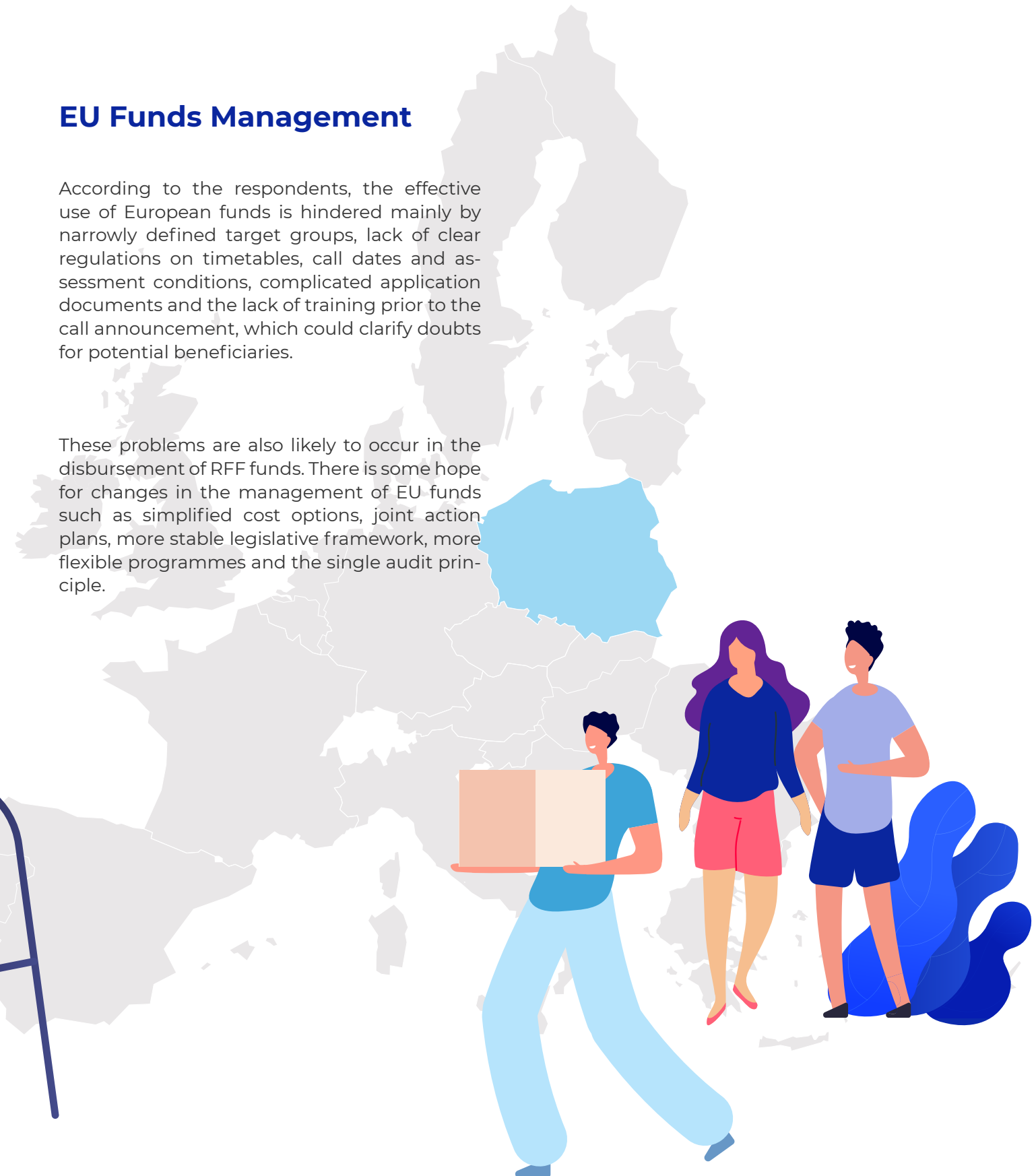
The Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy was responsible for the creation of the Plan. However, the regions, with responsibility for social inclusion policy development and implementation, were not involved in the preparation of the Plan and were not informed about the process of its development.



## EU Funds Management

According to the respondents, the effective use of European funds is hindered mainly by narrowly defined target groups, lack of clear regulations on timetables, call dates and assessment conditions, complicated application documents and the lack of training prior to the call announcement, which could clarify doubts for potential beneficiaries.

These problems are also likely to occur in the disbursement of RFF funds. There is some hope for changes in the management of EU funds such as simplified cost options, joint action plans, more stable legislative framework, more flexible programmes and the single audit principle.



# ROMANIA



## Social Services Focus in the NRRP

The NRRP does not clearly indicate what share of the funds will be allocated for social purposes. Many of the planned measures for social services, including those related to the social economy, have been subordinated to larger general objectives (e.g. entrepreneurship development or digitalisation of public administration). This makes it difficult to answer the question of whether the social services sector will receive sufficient resources to achieve its objectives.

The Plan covers support for older people, children and families, and persons with disabilities. Furthermore, it addresses the issues of unemployment and long-term care reforms. However, many vulnerable social groups are not targeted by the Plan. These include persons affected by domestic violence, persons living in isolation and rural communities in poverty, persons leaving prison, persons living with mental health issues, homeless persons, single unemployed parents, refugees and migrants, youth not in employment or training and the working poor. The Plans does not include investments in social services workforce or in innovation and digitalisation of social services.

## Involvement in the NRRP

Respondents are not aware of the Ministry that took the lead in creating the Plan. During the preparation of the Plan, the national government did not ask public or private institutions to send their proposals, nor did it hold a public consultation on the final shape of the Plan. Individual institutions themselves decided to send their projects to the Ministry, but did not receive feedback.

## EU Funds Management

Despite the hopes raised by the introduction of simplified cost options or the single audit principle, respondents indicate that a more stable legislative framework and more flexible programmes would facilitate the use of funds considerably.

Procedures for accessing EU funds are still seen as burdensome and overly bureaucratic. Other problems raised include the need to spend the money within a certain timeframe, which results in funds being invested in responding to regulations rather than actual needs. Members also mention the need for further support from managing authorities. Overall, the lack of expertise on EU funds in general is a serious obstacle to the effective use of EU funding.







## Social Services Focus in the NRRP

At first sight, much of the RRP funding is to be used for social objectives (up to 25%). However, the Plan does not clearly indicate what share of the funds will be allocated to social services for vulnerable populations. Many specific objectives concerning social inclusion have been subordinated to larger general objectives (e.g. digitalisation of public administration). This makes it difficult to answer the question of whether the social services sector will receive sufficient resources to achieve its targets.

Overall, the Plan covers a wide range of vulnerable groups and social issues, including older people, children and families, youth, persons with disabilities and with mental health issues as well as unemployment, long-term care reform, social services digitalisation, educational segregation, integration of health and social care, improved access to early childcare, reform of the needs assessment system (for various state-supported benefits) and inspections in the field of social care and protection.

However, there are several missing or just vaguely mentioned themes, including social housing (reforms and investments for social housing construction will follow up and support the measures of the Plan, but will not be implemented through the Plan), support for people with drug addiction problems and for victims of domestic violence. Furthermore, the Plan does not include any objectives regarding social entrepreneurship and social economy. The Plan states that, where possible and appropriate, investment through a social economy organisation is widely seen as positive, and refers to cooperation with social economy organisations during the implementation phase of the Plan. However, it is not clear how this provision will translate to specific public procurement decisions.

## Involvement in drafting of the NRRP

The Ministry of Finance, in particular the Value for Money Department and the Financial Policy Institute, were responsible for preparing the Plan. In the preparation of each component of the Plan, the Ministry worked with the responsible ministry/ministries for that particular theme. The drafting of the text, its components and allocations were implemented by government officials and their advisors.

Despite the announcement to hold a roundtable on the creation of the Plan in the summer of 2020, this did not happen. In December 2020, the Ministry of Finance announced a public consultation through a specific website [www.planobnovy.sk](http://www.planobnovy.sk). The public could make suggestions via the website, but we cannot assess as to whether the proposals have been taken into consideration, which has been criticised by NGOs. In March 2021, there was an opportunity to join the official comment procedure through the legislative e-portal (as for all other laws and strategic documents).

## EU Funds Management

Although, in principle, the Slovak NRRP sets ambitious goals for social services and offers hope for successful reform of the sector, past experience in the use of European funds reveals obstacles that may threaten its effective implementation.

Respondents point to an overly complicated and bureaucratic system of granting and auditing funds, the long process of public procurement (which may take up to a year) and frequent changes of implementing documentation. Moreover, communication concerning the Plan is complicated because the process is

running in parallel with the preparation of the Partnership Agreement for 2021-27, which is being handled by another ministry. For many organisations, but also experts in the social field, there is no clear distinction between the two processes.

The implementation of the Plan may be further hampered as relevant stakeholders are still not informed about the details of planned reforms while the timeframe for the use of the recovery funds is very ambitious. Greater involvement in discussions with local authorities and the third sector would certainly increase the chances of achieving the objectives set. It has also been highlighted that it will be crucial to ensure synergies between different sources of funding, especially when certain activities can only be financed through a specific fund and when projects are to cover groups that are not directly addressed in the Plan but could be supported under other programmes.





# SLOVENIA



## Social Services Focus in the NRRP

The NRRP foresees significant investments in the areas of social protection and long-term care. Other important social issues such as unemployment and support for young people and persons with disabilities are also included in the Plan.

There are, however many areas of intervention that are missing, including the digitalisation of social services, a strategy for reinforcing the social services workforce, support for children and families, support for persons living with mental health issues, a homelessness prevention programme, a poverty eradication strategy, and child protection and support to adulthood for young people leaving care.

## Involvement in the NRRP

The Association of Centres of Social Work, bringing together the 16 public regional social service centres, had no knowledge of the persons/institutions responsible for preparing the Plan. The Centres were not requested to provide their drafts and they were not informed of any consultation process.

## EU Funds Management

*No answer*



# SPAIN



## Social Services Focus in the NRRP

The Plan envisages four axes for recovery and modernisation, one of them focused on social cohesion and inclusion, which prioritises the economy of care and reinforcement of inclusion policies. Within this line of action, older people are one of the main vulnerable groups targeted, although respondents identify the need for more concreteness, and expressed concerns that more than 50% of the funding was being oriented to investment in residential long-term care facilities rather than promoting deinstitutionalisation and home care.

Another line of action within the social cohesion and inclusion axis is youth and children. However, investment focuses primarily on children in child protection, while prevention and fighting child poverty more broadly seems to be missing. Nonetheless, the Plan includes a overarching investment to increase the capacity of public pre-school child care places, mainly for 1-2 year olds. However, members agree that a more specific plan against child poverty and a preventive approach should also be included.

The Plan also includes recommendations on improving the coverage and appropriateness of minimum income programmes and family support. The inclusion of migrants is mentioned in the Plan, but a specific investment line for a holistic and cross-cutting approach is missing.

Although regions have been requested to reserve 15% of funding for local authorities, local authorities consider this investment as insufficient and fear that it will not be possible for them to develop the programmes they need to fund a solid recovery.

Some respondents pointed out their concern with national government proposals to create a new model of care based on responsibilities that currently sit within different sectors, such as education (conciliation), health (nursing) and social services (telecare, residential facilities, long-term care). This may lead to the creation of a parallel structure rather than the establishment of cross-cutting overarching care legislation.

## Involvement in the NRRP

The government, in its proposal for the Plan provided for the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders through informative meetings with the Ministries, regions, the federation of local authorities and social partners.

The proposal for investment in social services related programmes was presented by the national government and agreed at a meeting with the regional government representatives. However, mainly due to the celerity of the process, it was not preceded or continued by specific work at technical level between national, regional and local stakeholders and therefore participation has been considered as insufficient by some agencies.

Representatives from regional governments of Madrid, Basque Country and Catalonia with responsibility for social services highlight the importance of co-governance between the national and regional governments in social services planning, as this is a responsibility of regional authorities.

Four Spanish regions that considered their participation so far insufficient have joined the EU Regions for Recovery initiative, of twenty-four regions from nine member states that request to participate in the post-covid decision mak-

ing process and that relevant actors are more actively involved in the NRRPs.

At a local level, participation has been organised through the Federation of Municipalities and Provinces. Cities have highlighted the importance of having the opportunity to participate more actively as they also have specific responsibilities for community-based social services.

## EU Funds Management

The main obstacle identified when it comes to the management of EU funds is bureaucracy and lack of information. Local and regional authorities find it difficult to access information and to count on direct communication mechanisms to answer queries, which are crucial for social services as the responsibility lies with the regions.

In light of their knowledge and experience of the situation on the ground, some regional authorities have requested the possibility to liaise directly with the Commission on their specific recovery plans, which they have had to submit to the national government for inclusion within the wider national plan submitted to the EC.



# SWEDEN



## Social Services Focus in the NRRP

The Swedish NRRP covers many important social issues and vulnerable populations. Particular emphasis has been placed on the needs of older people, who were most affected by the pandemic. The Plan addresses also the challenges linked with unemployment, poverty (although more radical steps should be taken to effectively tackle the problem), long-term care reforms (both in residential facilities and community care), social services workforce and the digitisation of social services. There is also support envisaged for refugees and migrants. Furthermore, special attention is paid to the problem of homelessness – the Plan includes investments in housing and easing rent controls for newly built houses.

However, there are some key areas of social services' work that are clearly missing. This includes integration strategies -including a focus on avoiding segregation in residential areas, support for families exposed to violence, youth, persons with disabilities and persons living with mental health issues. There are also no objectives on improving the child protection system and support for young people leaving care. Another problem the Plan ignores is the increase in gun crime by young people. The reforms of the employment system, especially the tensions between state-run agencies and municipalities, are not discussed either.

## Involvement in the NRRP

The respondents were not aware of who was responsible for drafting the Swedish NRRP or what the different stages of its adoption were. ESN was indicated as a primary source of

knowledge on recovery funds programming. A similar lack of knowledge was characteristic of most social services both at municipal and the regional levels. .

## EU Funds Management

The respondents stress that the primary barrier in accessing EU funds is excessive bureaucracy related to applying for and accounting for funding. Simplified cost options, joint action plans, more flexible programmes and single audit principles, if effectively implemented, are believed to prevent these problems.



# CONCLUDING REMARKS

## Looking Forward

Twelve months after European leaders agreed the European Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) of €672.5 billion to support the European economy after Covid-19, countries have been submitting their national plans to the European Commission to be able to access EU recovery funds.

Countries have been negotiating their recovery and reform programmes since last October and those that have been particularly hit by the pandemic are expecting the arrival of the funds like a godsend. However, many fear that the arrival of the funds might be delayed until the autumn and impact their capacity of using the funds within a very ambitious timeframe until 2023.

At the European Social Network (ESN) we have been spearheading an initial assessment of the plans with public social services to seek their views on national reforms and investments for social services. Our initial assessment of the national plans submitted to the Commission seems to reiterate that the approach to addressing social issues has been taken primarily through reskilling and labour market activation or a bricks and mortar focus on building up residential facilities.

EU recovery funds should respond to the strategic priorities set out by the European Commission. Its Action Plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights sets three targets related to em-

ployment and fighting poverty. But the plans seem to largely miss much-needed investment in social inclusion and social services reform to make them a reality.

While the situation differs across countries and in some cases, plans do focus on the economy of care and social services, for the most part it seems as if the plans appear to miss a focus on social services and social care innovation and reform. This is especially the case when it comes to investments towards a more community and home-based model, and specifically funding for their workforce, which has been particularly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Recent European funds represent an important opportunity to mitigate the impact of the pandemic.

As a society, we have contracted a large moral debt due to the number of excess deaths of older people in residential social and care services during the pandemic. Governments across Europe knew that older people were most vulnerable to Covid-19 but failed to adequately shelter social services and social care. The plans that fail to acknowledge and resource the historic and prolonged underinvestment in public health and social care services also fail to grasp the economic impact that well-resourced social services add. What is more, they ignore the evidence that increased participation in the labour market by vulnerable groups would be helped through investing in the sector.

National resilience and transformation plans to access EU recovery funds should highlight the importance for national governments to work in cooperation with regional and local public social services to invest in social services transformations. These transformations include:

- A care guarantee for all to ensure that the model of care shifts towards prevention and family support, upholding children and young people's best interest, and promoting a community and home-based approach for people with disabilities and older adults.
- Modernisation of infrastructure, including the digitalisation of platforms and processes, tools supporting decision-making, and assisted living technologies.
- Partnerships across services to support people with complex needs, such as homeless people investing in preventive approaches and integrated housing and care models.
- National workforce strategies supporting the formal workforce improving the sector's attractiveness, development and resources, as well as informal carers respite, guidance and help.
- Economic activation and job creation, as social, home and community-based services have the capacity to integrate large population segments into the job market to incentivise the care economy.

We acknowledge that the challenge we are talking about is not only large, but a moving target as Europe is faced with additional waves of the pandemic. That said, it is crucial that these principles drive the transformation of our social welfare systems.

As the Commission assesses the national plans, it should ensure that

- they are fully aligned with our moral obligation to shift child support towards a preventative-based one and care for older adults towards community and home-based care. This should ensure that what happened last year in care homes does not happen again.
- EU policies and funds are not used any longer to implement patchy solutions such as renovation of nursing facilities, but to make possible and recognisable a large range of initiatives to make life in the community for all a reality.
- its assessment underlines the need to invest in structural reforms that transform the model of public social services and social care to one that promotes preventive family and community-based social services, reinforces home care, ensures community social care after hospital discharge, and addresses current employment and skill gaps.



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