

Integrated Minimum Income and Social Services for Effective Social Inclusion

Response to the European Commission
Call for Evidence on Minimum Income



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 ensure the visibility of the perspective of public social services at the European level, while supporting the development of effective social policy and social care practice through the exchange of knowledge and expertise.

For further information about ESN, visit www.esn-eu.org.

About this briefing

ESN represents the perspective of its member organisations, public social services, in European initiatives. With this briefing, ESN submits its response to the call for evidence launched by the European Commission on minimum income, representing the views and work of ESN members. This response is the result of many initiatives undertaken by ESN over the past 30 years in areas of social inclusion ranging from child poverty, through integrated social support, to integrated service delivery and inclusive activation of people furthest from the labour market.

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Introduction

In preparation of a Council Recommendation on Minimum Income to be published in autumn 2022 the European Commission launched a call for evidence to civil society organisations working on social inclusion.

This initiative will modernise the existing European policy frameworks on minimum income such as the 1992 Council Recommendations on Minimum Income and the 2008 European Commission Recommendation on Active Inclusion of people excluded from the labour market. The upcoming Council Recommendations are meant to provide guiding principles along the areas of access and coverage, adequacy, labour market inclusion, social activation, cooperation of enabling services and governance systems to ensure coordination, evaluation and monitoring of involved services.

Our work on Minimum Income and Integrated Social Inclusion

Depending on the country and on the organisation, members of the European Social Network (ESN) members have responsibility for social work, income support and employment services. They are responsible for strategic development, securing funds and planning expenditure and have a significant role in building effective partnerships and quality assurance of social services.

ESN has been working on inclusive ways of supporting people farthest from the labour market, including those receiving minimum income for many years.

In 2006 - 2007 ESN held a series of seminars on social inclusion covering issues such as access to quality services, antidiscrimination and integration, social and employment activation and child poverty and protection, leading to the set-up of a working group on 'active inclusion and employment' from 2008 – 2009. The outcomes of the working group were published in ESN's '[Realising Potential](#)' report.

In 2012, ESN conducted a policy review on the impact of the 2008 Commission Recommendation on 'Active Inclusion of People excluded from the Labour market' in eight European countries and identified three key challenges:

1. finding an adequate level of income for those who can and those who cannot work;
2. coordination of services (social, employment, education, housing, health);
3. working closely with people taking account of their individual circumstances to help them make progress towards inclusion in the labour market and in the community as a whole.

The assessment found that the impact of the EU's recommendation on active inclusion had been limited in most countries except in Finland, Spain and Portugal, where it was an important incentive to redirect and enhance national social policy through an integrated and comprehensive approach combining adequate income support, inclusive labour markets and access to quality services.

In 2015, ESN responded to the European Commission consultation in preparation of the 2016 European Council Recommendation on the 'Integration of Long-term Unemployed People in the Labour Market.' In this consultation ESN highlighted that activation grounded only on employment does not offer a real opportunity to people furthest from the labour market to be socially included, especially for those in a situation where participation in the labour market is limited. Therefore, it is key to shift policy and practice from activation focused solely on employment to an 'inclusive activation' approach. This means that people furthest from the labour market are supported in a holistic manner which is adapted to their needs, where social, health, education, housing and employment services are all considered relevant in promoting their social inclusion.

The concept of 'inclusive activation', as implemented by many ESN members, is built on six principles:

- adequate income support;
- personalised plan;
- access to quality services;
- inclusive labour markets;
- holistic view of needs;
- integrated services.

In 2018, ESN held a seminar on '[Inclusive Activation](#),' where we spoke of inclusive activation approaches for people furthest from the labour market with whom social services work on a daily basis. This group of people represent a cohort that is usually not properly supported by mainstream employment services. Therefore, public social services play a key role in leading these approaches and reaching out to these populations to support them into employment through integrated social inclusion programmes. This seminar led to the publication of an [Inclusive Activation Toolkit](#), providing guidance and practice examples on inclusion strategies of people furthest from the labour market.

In 2021, during its annual conference, ESN organised an online debate on integrated income and social services programmes, which led to the publication of its 'improving integrated income and social services programmes' briefing in 2022.

ESN is currently a partner of two EU funded innovation projects supporting the set-up of local social inclusion programmes for minimum income beneficiaries in Tuscany (Italy) and Asturias (Spain) with responsibility for benchmarking other international practices for the development of the regional models, international peer reviews and dissemination.

In autumn 2022, ESN will hold a seminar on integrated social inclusion programmes combining minimum income and social services for the most vulnerable. Findings of this seminar will be shared in a report by the end of the year.

The ESN Response

The upcoming Council Recommendations on Minimum Income will provide guidance for EU member states' minimum income support systems in line with six guiding principles:

1. Access and Coverage;
2. Adequacy;
3. Labour Market Inclusion;
4. Social Activation;
5. Cooperation of Enabling Services;
6. Governance Systems to ensure Coordination, Evaluation and Monitoring of involved services.

ESN will provide input to each of those principles along three main threads: Access, Coverage and Adequacy; Social Activation, Cooperation of Enabling Services and Labour Market Inclusion; and Governance Systems, Cooperation, Monitoring and Evaluation.

I. Access, Coverage and Adequacy

Enhancing geographical coverage

Limited geographical accessibility and spatial coverage might have a negative impact for social services take-up or difficulties in accessing services. National and subnational authorities should undertake an assessment of needs and socio-economic considerations of localities and use the data gathered to plan and establish services accordingly to ensure that they are geographically accessible. Translating the assessment of needs into geo-maps, which visualise the location of all social services, is a crucial development to help in this process. Likewise, the reinforcement of social services centres, with professionals coming from various sectors including social work, social educators, psychologists and employment advisers is also an example of how we can ensure adequate geographical coverage.

Improving access with outreach measures

Those who are entitled to minimum income and other social support measures do not always apply for their entitlements. Public social services and partner organisations from the third sector are key to reach out to the most vulnerable in order to facilitate people's access to their social rights. The use of mobile units of professionals who go out of centres into their communities is key to improve outreach and accessibility. This is an area of work social services are well experienced on.

Simplifying procedures

Complex systems and lack of coordination of services also have a negative impact on services take-up and accessibility. National and subnational authorities should make sure that they design simple procedures for beneficiaries; for example, a unique entry point. Based on the evidence collected by ESN over the years, this entry point should be public community social services through their community social services centres or their offices in the municipalities. There should also be a professional of reference, usually a social worker, who can accompany them to navigate the system.

Digitalising to facilitate access

Digitisation should support the accessibility of beneficiaries. For example, national and subnational authorities should engage in digitising the application process for benefits. The accessibility of digital applications should be supported through digital helpers, while onsite services should remain available for those unable to use or access the Internet.

Linking adequate financial support with personalised social services

There are different models of financial support in EU countries to ensure an adequate minimum income. However, beyond the requirement to provide each person with a minimum standard of living, it is key to link financial benefits to a personalised social inclusion plan, where labour market activation is one key pillar of a wider support plan to have people fully included in society.

II. Social Activation, Cooperation of Enabling Services and Labour Market Inclusion

Social services-led inclusive activation approach

Activation grounded only on employment does not offer a real opportunity for social inclusion to people furthest from the labour market. Social services are working with people farthest from the labour market on a daily basis; therefore, they lead programmes for people who cannot be immediately included in the primary labour market and require instead an integrated social inclusion plan. To support them, it is key to shift policy and practice from activation focused solely on employment to an 'inclusive activation' approach, led by social services who co-create with the person(s) concerned an integrated social inclusion plan which involves access to financial support, social, health, education, housing and employment services. For instance, care duties towards children or family members can hinder the possibility of finding and retaining a job. Support with care duties should be therefore included in labour market inclusion programmes. Mental health problems may also be a barrier and require additional support. Some people might not have enough financial support including access to a dentist or individual job coaching, for which they could pay for through a personal budget that could be part of their integrated social inclusion plan jointly managed with their professional of reference.

Coaching on job skills even after successful labour market entry

People with difficulties in joining the labour market might have little or no experience of work. In addition, they may lack social competences, emotional management, conflict resolution skills; they may have difficulties in arriving on time or adjusting to the rules of the workplace. Therefore, they should receive personalised support in preparation but also as they have found a job in the initial months.

Involving local employers

For people furthest from the labour market, building links with local employers can increase people's chances of finding a job and be socially included. Public authorities can facilitate the dialogue that can lead to the development of these links by talking with employers and work with them to provide opportunities in the primary job market for people with complex needs.

Develop local support networks

Isolation is one of the most recurrent issues of people furthest from the labour market and a cause of social exclusion. Building social networks helps people in situations of isolation develop significant links with other members of the community. Therefore, minimum income beneficiaries should be linked to local social networks which can take form via peer support or mentoring programmes in community social services centres. Community social services play a key role as unique entry point, a place where the professional of reference is located, who should also link up with the wider community e.g. volunteers and local associations that can help to reaching out to those who are most at risk of isolation.

Collaboration with enabling services

National authorities are usually responsible for the design of minimum income programmes, while regional and local social services are responsible for implementation. It is key that national authorities collaborate closely with regional and local social services to ensure beneficiaries receive support in an integrated manner.

Co-producing social inclusion with the beneficiary

Minimum Income beneficiaries should not be passive recipients of support, but the co-producers of individual, step-by-step measures to ensure their active participation in society and where possible in the labour market. As highlighted above, public social services should work with the person to put in place an integrated personalised social inclusion plan.

III. Governance Systems, Cooperation, Monitoring and Evaluation

Cooperation of different services and professionals

As highlighted above, minimum income is usually designed at national level but implemented locally. Therefore, there needs to be a robust governance system in place between national and sub-national authorities.

The same goes for professionals across sectors. This involves on the one hand public sector professionals from employment and social services and between public and non-public sectors; for example, with third sector organisations responsible for the provision of services. Joint staff training is an area of investment to enhance cooperation between professionals to support better the coverage of beneficiaries' needs.

Develop professional profiles that simplify continuous support and monitoring

A professional of reference who may be a case manager or the point of contact for the person's social inclusion plan should be the first point of contact for beneficiaries. Evidence shows that this professional figure can help increase chances of services take-up, establish personalised or tailored care plans, and monitor the implementation of the plan.

Co-design and evaluation

The beneficiaries of these integrated forms of support are experts by experience and can help public social services design more effective services. Therefore, they need to be active participants in the development and monitoring of their personalised integrated social inclusion plans.

Data interoperability

We spoke above about coordination of services and professionals. This coordination would not be effective without robust IT systems that allow to record the data and are interoperable between administrations, and possibly between public administration and non-public providers. Integrated recording of data can allow for the centralisation of all relevant information to support beneficiaries. This helps professionals access all information and avoids beneficiaries having to retell their story multiple times. Therefore, national and subnational authorities should invest in IT solutions that enable at least professionals in public employment and social services to access data of jointly supported beneficiaries. A further issue to explore is access of data for non-public providers, requiring adaptation of legislation around statutory duties as defined by law, and data protection issues.

Monitoring and assessment

The implementation of the guidelines included in the Council Recommendation, should be monitored through European and national monitoring mechanisms.

At European level, the European Commission should possibly look at reforms implemented nationally through the European Semester process but there are many competing priorities the European Commission needs to look at, so it is important to somehow prioritise what the Commission will assess within national plans from a social perspective.

The Commission could put in place a specific mechanism such as a platform to address progress on integrated social inclusion programmes that include minimum income and social services. The Commission should then be careful that this is not just a conversation with social partners solely focused on employment. Instead, the Commission should have a clear social inclusion vision that integrates representatives of national and subnational authorities with responsibility for the design of integrated social inclusion programmes combining minimum income and at least social and employment services.

At national level, the Commission should look at promoting monitoring frameworks that assess the situation holistically covering at least three pillars: social rights legislation, economic investment, and coverage along the lines of ESN's proposed 'Rights-Economic Investment-Coverage (REC) Index'. This index is based on a national framework developed by the Spanish social services directors' association, which ESN proposes to be adapted at EU level by studying its potential transferability across countries.

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