

Putting People First

Investing in Social Services
Promoting Social inclusion



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“The 20 principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights are our guide towards the Europe that is fair, inclusive and full of opportunity. Social rights belong to all of us: from the right to equal opportunity, employment support, from worklife balance to healthcare.”

Nicolas Schmit
European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights

About us

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.

Reference Group on the European Semester

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 far from policy and decision-making processes at European level. ESN tries to bridge this gap through its Reference Group on the European Semester (hereafter 'the Group').

The Group includes representatives from national associations of social services directors, social services in regional and local au-

thorities, and national associations of social services professionals. Set up in 2014, the Group aims 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 Reference Group meets once a year to engage in mutual learning and discuss some of the key issues and recommendations provided in the report based on their (country) inputs. The meeting is also an opportunity to exchange their views on the European Semester cycle with officials from the European Commission.

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List of countries abbreviations

Austria - AT

Belgium - BE

Croatia - HR

Czechia - CZ

Denmark - DK

Estonia - EE

Finland - FI

France - FR

Ireland - IE

Italy - IT

Latvia - LV

Malta - ML

Poland - PL

Romania - RO

Slovakia - SK

Slovenia - SI

Spain - ES

Sweden - SE

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Introduction

Methodology

Each year, the Group follows the European Commission's cycle of policy coordination with the Countries known as the European Semester.

The report has been drafted based on the answers to an ESN questionnaire, which was completed by members of ESN's Reference Group on the European Semester from the following 19 countries: Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden.

The tailored questionnaire focussed on three policy areas linked to three key principles of the EPSR for social services:

Principle 11 – Addressing Child Poverty, Promoting Childcare and Support to Children

- Children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality.
- Children have the right to protection from poverty. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities

Principle 18 – Long-Term Care

- Everyone has the right to affordable long-term care services of good quality, in particular homecare and community-based services.

Principle 19 – Combatting Homelessness and Supporting Homeless People

- Access to social housing or housing assistance of good quality shall be provided for those in need.
- Vulnerable people have the right to appropriate assistance and protection against forced eviction.

About this report

This report conveys the views of public social services on the European Commission's assessment about the social situation in European countries with a particular focus on social services. It includes an overview of the European Semester economic policy coordination framework between the European Commission and national governments, an analysis of the implementation of relevant European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) for social services, alongside an analysis of the European Semester 2022 Spring Package's relevant themes for social services.

The report also contains a cross-country analysis based on information provided by members of ESN's Reference Group on the European Semester from 19 countries. The analysis highlights progress in the realisation of social objectives included in the National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs), discusses key issues in implementing relevant principles for social services of the EPSR, and presents main challenges ESN members have faced in providing social services to people fleeing the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

This report is shared with the European Commission to inform the next cycle of policy analysis and European Semester recommendations, and with Countries' representatives. The Group members are encouraged and supported to meet national government representatives in their countries to discuss the findings.

- Adequate shelter and services shall be provided to the homeless in order to promote their social inclusion.

For each of the three policy areas we first identified the most important common issues and challenges facing social services as reported by ESN members. Second, we summarised the recommendations provided by questionnaire respondents to address the identified challenges.

The questionnaire enabled ESN members to explain the situation and recent developments in their countries in relation to these three policy areas. For each area, members of the Group were requested to present available data and statistics, legislation and policies, and related implementation challenges. In addition, ESN members proposed recommendations that the European Commission could possibly use next year in the framework of the European Semester for each of the three areas.

The information that we received has helped us identify key findings which will be useful for the analysis of the social situation that the European Commission undertakes in the framework of the European Semester.

The individual country profiles with further information about the specific situation for each country are published online.





The 2022 European Semester Spring Package



The European Semester 2022

Introduced in 2010,¹ the European Semester is an annual cycle of policy coordination between the European Commission and national governments in policy areas like economics, employment and social policies.

For the 2022 cycle,² the EU has adapted the European Semester to also monitor the Recovery and Resilience Fund (RRF).³ The RRF, which is a central pillar of the NextGenerationEU.⁴ programme, provides financial support for countries through grants and loans for a total amount of 723.8 billion euro. The aim is to mitigate the economic and social impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and ensure European economies and societies are more sustainable, resilient, and better prepared for the challenges and opportunities arising from the green and digital transitions. The RRF entered into force on 19 February 2021 and finances reforms and investments from the beginning of the pandemic in February 2020 until 31 December 2026.

To benefit from this financial support, national governments were required to formulate and submit National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs)⁵ to the European Commission. Each national government can receive financing up to an agreed allocation based on the investments and reforms set out in their plans.

In formulating their NRRPs, national governments have significant leverage regarding the reforms to be funded, but they should address the challenges identified in the European Semester, particularly the European Commission's 2019⁶ and 2020 Country Specific Recommendations⁷ (CSRs). In addition to this, countries are encouraged to align their plans with the Commission's six Pillars (see table I). EU National governments are requested to ensure that at least 37% of their total allocation contributes to climate change policies and 20% to digital initiatives. The policy priorities of ESN are relevant across each of the six Pillars, but where an explicit mentioning of our priorities is given within a sub-field of a Pillar, we have made a note of it in table I.

1 www.ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester_en.

2 www.ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester/european-semester-timeline/2022-european-semester-cycle_en.

3 www.ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility_en.

4 www.next-generation-eu.europa.eu/index_en.

5 www.ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility_en#national-recovery-and-resilience-plans.

6 www.ec.europa.eu/info/publications/2019-european-semester-country-specific-recommendations-commission-recommendations_en.

7 www.ec.europa.eu/info/publications/2020-european-semester-country-specific-recommendations-commission-recommendations_pl.

Table I: Pillars of the Recovery and Resilience Fund & Social Services Coverage

The Six Pillars of the Recovery and Resilience Fund	Subfields that cover social services
Green Transition	N/A
Digital Transition	N/A
Smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, including economic cohesion, jobs, productivity, competitiveness, research, development and innovation, and a well-functioning internal market with strong SMEs	N/A
Social and Territorial Transition	A) Social housing and other social infrastructures B) Social Protection, including social services and integration of vulnerable groups
Health, and economic, social and institutional resilience, with the aim of, inter alia, increasing crisis preparedness and crisis response capacity	A) Healthcare B) Long-term Care
Policies for the next generation, children and the youth, such as education and skills	A) Early childhood education and care

The NRRPs are assessed by the European Commission for their compatibility with the priorities of the EU's recovery strategy. Once assessed they are approved by the European Council, and the EU pays up to 13% of the total support upfront to kick-start the recovery. National governments are expected to implement the reforms and investments outlined in their plans and upon completion of agreed milestones and targets, they can request future instalments up to twice a year.

The 2022 European Semester, which integrates monitoring the implementation of the RRF, consists of the following elements:

- The Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy (ASGS)⁸ was issued in November 2021 and set out the general economic and social priorities for the EU for 2022.
- National Reform Programmes and Stability / Convergence Programmes⁹ are presented by the Countries in April, setting out their economic and fiscal policy plans.
- National Country Reports¹⁰ were published in May 2022 with an overview of the economic and social developments in each country. The reports outline the current challenges they face, as well as a forward-looking analysis of how resilient their systems are. Country Reports also identify the challenges, which have not been sufficiently addressed by the RRF. The overview includes an assessment of progress on the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR)¹¹ principles.
- Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs)¹² were proposed by the Commission in policy areas that need addressing,

8 www.ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester/european-semester-timeline/autumn-package_en

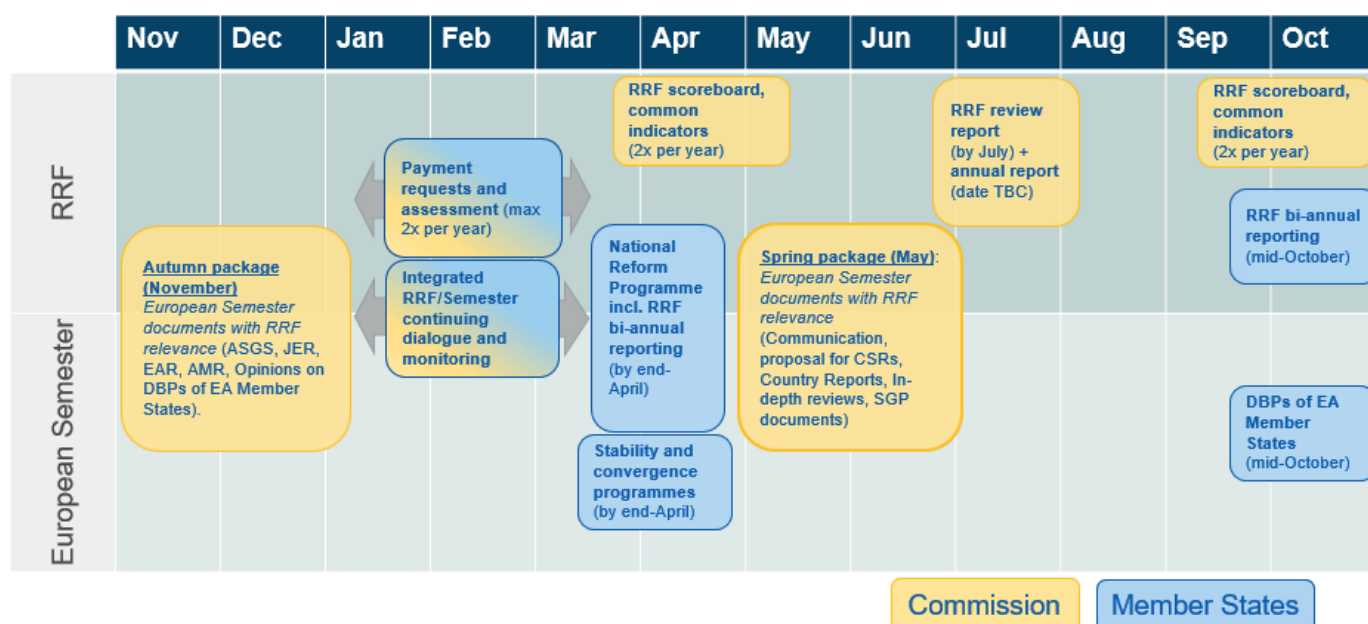
9 www.ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester/european-semester-timeline/national-reform-programmes-and-stability-or-convergence-programmes_en

10 www.ec.europa.eu/info/publications/2022-european-semester-country-reports_en

11 www.ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en

12 www.ec.europa.eu/info/publications/2022-european-semester-country-specific-recommendations-commission-recommendations_en

Table II: European Semester Timeline



Source: European Commission

and they were adopted by the Council in May 2022, alongside the Country Reports.

The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR)

The EPSR aims to deliver new and more effective rights for EU citizens through 20 key principles which were jointly signed by the Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council on 17 November 2017.

Over half of the principles directly relate to the work of social services including support for children, inclusion of people with disabilities, long-term care, and housing. It should be noted that the principles are not legally binding.

Nevertheless, mainstreaming the principles of the EPSR has become commonplace within the European Semester.

Since 2019, the Country Reports have been benchmarked against 12 separate indicators taken from the European Commission's Social Scoreboard.¹³ In March 2021 an Action Plan¹⁴ for the implementation of the EPSR was published by the European Commission. It proposed a renewed list of indicators for its monitoring, which was endorsed by the Employment and Social Affairs Council in June 2021 and outlined in table III.

As with the EPSR, the indicators are divided into three main dimensions – equal opportunities, fair working conditions, and social protection and social inclusion. Each of these headings contains a series of principles, which in turn relate to relevant policy areas. Most of the 20 principles are represented by at least 1 indicator. They can be referred to as headline indicators and secondary indicators, although discussions within the Council remain ongoing as to the exact list of secondary indicators and their role within the Country Reports.

¹³ www.ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/european-pillar-of-social-rights/indicators/social-scoreboard-indicators

¹⁴ www.ec.europa.eu/info/publications/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan_en

Table III: European Pillar of Social Rights Indicators

	Equal Opportunities	Fair working conditions	Social Protection and Social Inclusion
Headline Indicators¹⁵	<p>Early leavers from education and training</p> <p>Individuals who have basic or above basic overall digital skills</p> <p>Young people neither in in employment nor in education and training (NEETs)</p> <p>Gender Employment Gap</p> <p>Income inequality – quintile share ration</p>	<p>Fair Working Conditions</p> <p>Employment rate</p> <p>Long-term unemployment rate</p> <p>Real gross disposable income of households</p>	<p>At-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate (AROPE)</p> <p>At-risk-of-poverty rate or exclusion of children (AROP)</p> <p>Impact of Social Transfers (other than pensions) on poverty reduction</p> <p>Disability employment gap</p> <p>Housing cost overburden</p> <p>Children aged less than 3 years in formal childcare</p> <p>Self-reported unmet need for medical care</p>
Secondary Indicators¹⁶	<p>Adult participation in learning</p> <p>Tertiary education attainment</p> <p>Gender gap in part-time employment</p> <p>Gender pay gap in unadjusted form</p>	<p>Activity rate</p> <p>Youth unemployment rate</p> <p>Employment in current job by duration</p> <p>Transition rates from temporary to permanent contracts</p> <p>In-work-at-risk-of-poverty rate</p>	

Analysis of the 2022 Spring Package

In May 2022 the European Commission published its Spring Package, which amongst other things, includes Country Reports and proposed Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) per country. The Country Reports provide an overview of the economic and social developments and challenges that countries are facing, as well as a forward-looking analysis of how resilient their systems are. In addition, the European Commission assesses countries' implementation of the EPSR principles and identifies challenges that it deems were insufficiently addressed within their NRRPs.

The Country Reports are divided into three main sections: first, the general economic and social situation within the country; second, the various priorities outlined within the NRRPs in terms of the actions that have been either implemented or will be implemented; and third, policy areas of concern or those to monitor for future development.

To gain an accurate overview of policies concerning ESN members within the Country Reports, a content analysis was carried out for five policy areas:

¹⁵ Headline indicators are outcome indicators that are survey-based and mandatory for all Member States for which such data are available or can be collected in the future. See: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/portfolio_of_indicators_en.pdf

¹⁶ Secondary outcome indicators: These are contextual indicators and complement the headline indicators of the objective. Countries can choose whether to populate them or not. See: *ibid.*

- Long-term care
- Social services
- Social protection
- Childcare
- Housing

In addition, it was noted where reference was made to social services' support for those fleeing Ukraine.

The 27 Country Reports were analysed by looking at:

- Policy initiatives that are either proposed or currently being implemented in each country
- Areas of concern relating to the European Commission's analysis of the current general economic and social situation.

The Country Reports and the Recovery and Resilience Fund

Given the scale of projects funded under the RRF, the Commission's discussion of various policies is often limited. Based on this information, our analysis serves to highlight the scope of funded projects rather than a detailed review of their development. The main findings of the analysis are as follows:

Plans to improve the provision of early childhood education and childcare were highlighted in seven countries (AT, CY, CZ, DE, EL, IT, MT).

14 countries were highlighted as having reform projects in the area of long-term care (AU, CY, CZ, EE, ES, FR, IT, LV, LT, PT, RO, SK, SI, SE). Such reforms range from improving the infrastructure around long-term care to ensure less end-of-life care takes place in hospitals (e.g. CZ), to specific projects for instance 'community nurses' in Austria.

However, reforms aimed at improvements in the area of social services were mentioned just in two Countries (BG, IT), even though other countries' NRRPs like Spain's include a social services reform as part of their milestones. In Italy, social services developments

include improving the coverage of services for dependent people across the regions, particularly for people with disabilities, with services taking a more multi-disciplinary approach and reducing institutionalisation. In Bulgaria, progress is being made in defining quality standards for the provision of social services.

Improvements in the provision of social housing were highlighted in six countries (IE, LT, LU, PT, SI, ES).

Plans to extend social protection schemes were mentioned in six countries, but there is variation in terms of targeting specific groups of beneficiaries. For example, minimum income schemes were highlighted in five countries, specifically the indexation of minimum income (BG, FR, LT, LV, RO, ES), and setting the minimum income level to 20% of the median income in 2023 (LT). Investments in child protection was highlighted for Romania, whilst further financial support for people with disabilities was highlighted in three countries (FR, IT, LT).

While reform efforts in areas related to social services are significant in their own right, relative to the scale and ambition of progress in other policy areas of the NRRPs, such as the Green and Digital Transitions, they are significantly smaller in relative terms.

The Country Reports and the General Economic and Social Situation

The need to improve access to, and the provision of early childcare was highlighted for eight countries (AU, BE, CY, CZ, EL, HU, IT, NL).

In the area of long-term care, eleven countries were noted as needing to improve investment, whilst also being mindful of the need to improve economic efficiencies within the system (CZ, EE, ES, FI, IE, MT, RO, SI, SK). For example, in Czechia, the Commission high-

lighted that a fragmented governance and financing structure hinders an appropriate and efficient provision of long-term care services. Meanwhile, the European Commission noted that an ageing population is putting long-term care systems in Estonia, Ireland and Romania under considerable pressure both in terms of accessibility and sustainability.

The need for improvements in social services was highlighted in seven countries (BG, FI, HU, IT, LT, LV, RO). For Bulgaria, the European Commission made reference to the need of having stronger links between social services and employment services and ensure that employment services are better targeted to individual needs. In other countries, the Commission underscored that there is a need to improve access to, and the capacity of, social services (FI, HU, IT, LT, LV, RO). Latvia, for example, was highlighted as requiring higher funding to make sustainable improvement in the provision of social services for vulnerable groups.

In the context of addressing homelessness, the need to improve the supply of social housing was highlighted in ten countries (CZ, DK, HU, ES, IE, LT, LV, NL, SK, SE).

The need to improve social protection systems was highlighted for seven countries (EE, HU, IT, LT, LV, PO, PL, MT). For each of the countries, the European Commission focused on the need to increase spending to improve the impact of social transfers to reduce poverty and social exclusion, as well as improving access to social protection and social protection systems' financial sustainability. In some instances, this was targeted at vulnerable groups such as children (MT) and people with disabilities (EE).

Finally, the need to support refugees from Ukraine was highlighted in four countries (CZ, LT, PO, SI).

Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs)

In the CSRs countries are usually issued with three or four recommendations, but each of

them is likely to refer to several policy issues. Despite the various areas of concern highlighted by the European Commission in the Country Reports, 18 countries were issued with no CSRs related to social services priorities (BE, BG, CY, FI, FR, DE, EL, HR, IE, IT, MT, NL, PT, PL, RO, SE, SI, SK). This section highlights the Recommendations that the Commission issued in areas related to social services and to which countries.

The Commission issued two recommendations on improving the provision of **long-term care** (EE, SI). For Estonia, the Commission highlighted the need to improve the affordability and quality of long-term care, in particular by ensuring its sustainable funding and the integration of health and social services. The Commission recommended Slovenia to make improvements to the long-term fiscal sustainability of its long-term care system.

The Commission recommended Lithuania reduces fragmentation in the planning and delivery of **social services**, as well as their integration with other services. Hungary was recommended to improve access to essential services, as well as improvements in the inclusion of the Roma community.

In the context of **reducing homelessness**, five countries (CZ, DM, ES, HU, LT) were recommended to improve the provision of social housing.

Improvements in social protection coverage were recommended for three countries (EE, HU, LV). In Estonia, this also included the need to extend the coverage of unemployment benefits, while in Hungary and Latvia the emphasis was on improving the adequacy of social protection for most vulnerable groups.

A final point to note is that within the recommendations, all countries were requested to take into account temporary and targeted support towards households most vulnerable to energy price increases and people fleeing the war in Ukraine.

Humanitarian crisis: war in Ukraine

This section provides an overview of the challenges faced by EU countries due to the war in Ukraine. It also outlines the steps taken to assist Ukrainian refugees at EU level and discusses relevant developments in Member States. In particular, this report highlights the key role of social services to increase the capacity to receive refugees; provide access to key services like social protection, healthcare, education, and support their integration into EU societies as foreseen by the Temporary Protection Directive.¹⁷

The Directive, adopted by the Council of the European Union on 4 March 2022, grants Ukrainian refugees the right to reside in the EU for one year, extendible for up to three years, and provides them with access to employment, education, social protection and healthcare. It also enables people fleeing Ukraine to move to another EU country before the issue of their residence permit and guarantees them limited freedom of movement in other EU countries (for 90 days within a 180-day period) after a residence permit is issued.

In addition, the European Commission has paid more than €3.5 billion in advance payments to national governments so they can provide humanitarian assistance for Ukrainian refugees. The pre-financing payments were made under REACT-EU¹⁸ as part of the EU's Cohesion's Action for Refugees in Europe (CARE).¹⁹ Furthermore, the possibility to mobilise available resources from EU cohesion policy flexibly within the 2014-2020 programme was introduced together with the possibility of fully financing refugee related initiatives with EU money (without the need of co-payment).

According to the EC country reports, across the EU public social services provides newly arrived refugees with access to education (CZ, DK, ES, IE, LV, LT, PL, RO), healthcare (CZ, DK, ES, LV, LT, PL, RO), housing (DK, ES, LV, LT, PT), unemployment benefits and/or (re)training services (CZ, ES, IE, LV, PT, PL). In some countries (ES, LT), special reception centres have been set up to guarantee all newly arrived refugees' access to accommodation. Several EU countries (CZ, IE) have made efforts to allow refugee children access formal childcare. In some countries, special subsidies have been introduced for Ukrainian refugees or their hosts (BG, LT).

Despite these concerted efforts and allocated EC funds, the EC notes a number of systemic problems faced by social services that prevent the effective provision of refugee support. First, the integration of people fleeing Ukraine is affecting the state budget in many countries (BU, CZ, DE, ES, HU, PL, RO, SK) and is putting considerable pressure on social systems (BU, CZ, DE, ES, HU, PL, RO, SK).

The provision of childcare services has reached its limits in many countries as existing facilities are unable to accommodate additional children, even if they are guaranteed access to relevant services by law – this is the case in those countries that have received the largest numbers of refugees (CZ, PL, SK). A similar situation may be occurring in education, aggravated by significant teacher shortages that have been reported for years in some countries (PL, SK).

Furthermore, the capacity of the housing market is being exhausted, impacted by rising rental costs (CZ, SK). Despite legal guarantees, access to the labour market for people with migrant backgrounds remains low in several countries, amongst other reasons due to language barriers and low qualifications (AT, SK).

17 www.home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/common-european-asylum-system/temporary-protection_en.

18 www.ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/newsroom/coronavirus-response/react-eu/

19 www.ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/funding/care/



Finally, despite the fact that the Commission's country reports attempt to give an overview of the challenges faced by EU countries in supporting Ukraine refugees, the picture remains incomplete in many aspects. As many as 10 out of 27 country reports do not mention any specific steps that national governments have taken to support those fleeing Ukraine or the challenges social services face in the provision of relevant support for refugees (GR, FR, HR, IT, CY, MT, NL, FI, SE, SI).

Although the Temporary Protection Directive requires EU Member States to provide refugees with access to early childhood education and care, education and training, labour market, or healthcare, specific measures (and obstacles) at national level are rarely discussed by the European Commission in its country reports.



Cross-Country Analysis

Implementation of the selected principles of the EPSR

The cross-country analysis is structured according to the three policy areas covered by the questionnaires. For each of the three policy areas we identify the most important common issues and challenges facing social services, as reported by ESN members, including some actions taken. Second, we summarise the recommendations provided by questionnaire respondents to address the challenges identified.

Childcare and support to children (Principle 11 of the European Pillar of Social Rights)

Key issues and Policy Developments

Three key issues related to childcare and child support policies and services, common to many countries, emerged from the analysis of the questionnaires:

- Reducing and preventing child poverty and providing access to good quality care operate within complex systems which present significant challenges;
- Children from disadvantaged backgrounds struggle to access the right type of support or have satisfactory experiences as users of services;
- Child and youth mental health services require improvement.

In many countries, children's support services are a shared competence between national and regional and local authorities. Safeguarding the rights of children and young people requires effective coordination both vertically (e.g. national, regional and local mechanisms) and horizontally (e.g. social services, health-care, education). Several respondents (AT, BE, EE, ES, HR, IT, SK) highlighted such coordination as being one of their greatest concerns both in terms of daily operations and

to effectively implement the EPSR's Principle 11 (childcare and support to children). Given that a division of competences and funding can lead to strong regional disparities in provision, there are often significant regional disparities in terms of coverage and quality of children's services. Respondents also highlighted the fragmentation of reform plans, which can limit their potential. For example, the Slovakian representative noted that while there were several plans and measures in place to achieve Principle 11, they were in different Ministries with sometimes limited co-ordination.

Some respondents highlighted the important function of the European Child Guarantee as a starting point to better coordinate different organisations (BE, ES, FI). For example, the Belgium National Action Plan brings together commitments, measures, and actions by the broad range of authorities involved at local, regional and federal levels. It therefore provides an important set of coordinated measures in the fight against child poverty and child protection. A point worth noting is that at the time of writing, not all EU national governments had submitted their National Action Plans.

There was also some caution on what could be achieved via the European Child Guarantee unless adequate resources were used to support the coordination of objectives, procedures and outcomes (e.g. HR, IT). While resources for children's services, including staffing levels and provision of services has always been a concern, it was noted that further resources would be required to deliver Principle 11. In addition, it is unclear the level of commitment to implementation at national level in several countries (AT, LV).

Further highlighting the importance of co-ordination and a joined-up approach to the issue, several respondents noted some positive developments within efforts to reduce child poverty.

For example, from 1 January 2022 Romania's government has increased the state allow-

ance for children up to 2 years old or up to 3 years old if the child has a disability. The Romanian Government has also approved the issuing of social vouchers to families and single parents below certain income thresholds to reduce child poverty and social exclusion. Progress is also being reported in Spain where the government will use financing from the European Social Fund Plus to tackle the fight against child poverty.²⁰

From a social services perspective, more can be done to identify and address child poverty. For example, in Croatia, 20% of children are currently at risk of poverty and social exclusion, but there are limited means through which they can be identified and thereby provided with both financial and non-financial support.

Several countries noted that disadvantaged children struggle to either access the right type of support or have satisfactory experiences as users of services (AT, FI, HR, SE, SK). Disadvantaged children include children with migrant background or minority communities, disabled children, children in institutionalised care, and those from certain low-income households.

The situation for children with disabilities or with life shortening conditions was a particular concern for the Estonian member, but there were also concerns from other respondents regarding children with learning disabilities being adequately supported either in education, the care system, or with their healthcare needs (e.g. AT, FI, LV, SK). In Denmark and Sweden equal opportunities for children from disadvantaged backgrounds was a particular concern.

There have been some improvements in reducing institutional care for children (e.g. CZ), but the use of residential care instead of foster care remains a concern in other countries. This is the case in Spain where residential care for children remains high. The Spanish Government has approved an action plan

so that no child under the age of 10 lives in residential care, which will be supported by EU funds. In Croatia, the Action Plan for the Development of Social Services (2021-2024) includes the aim to increase the number of foster families for children, especially for children who cannot return to their biological families, children with behavioural problems, children with disabilities, and unaccompanied children.

Related to the previous point, the majority of respondents raised concerns regarding the provision of child mental health services. In many countries, access to children's mental healthcare is regarded as being inadequate (AT, DK, ES, FI, LV, PL, SE, SK). Child mental wellbeing, both for those who access social services and more broadly, is a growing concern, although children within the care system are more likely to need access to mental health services and support from mental health professionals. Inadequate resources in child mental health services or a lack of timely access can have significant consequences both in terms of immediate health and wellbeing, as well as over the life-course.

As well as the need to provide adequate resources, including specific training for the broad range of mental health professionals, multi-disciplinary teams engaging with children and their families are also being implemented. For example, in 2021 Malta introduced a new healthcare service for children in care with the aim of providing a holistic healthcare plan. The service aims to ensure children in state care are vaccinated, have proper dental care, and have access to mental health services.

Many respondents also highlighted concerns regarding a shortage in children services workforce due to increasing demand, decreasing funds, and overburdened workloads (AT, FR, IR).

20 The European Social Fund Plus requires national governments to allocate at least 5% of spending to child poverty



Key Recommendations

The improvement of good quality care for children and poverty reduction requires coordinated national plans and effective implementation (AT, BE, EE, ES, HR, IT, SK). ESN respondents highlighted the need to build on the foundations of the European Child Guarantee National Plans. This will continue efforts being made to improve coordination between the various levels of government, as well as the different agencies involved, such as social services, education, and healthcare. It is also necessary to develop common national standards and protocols for coordination to ensure quality services for all children (e.g. EE, GR, IT).

In addition, resources are required to ensure coordination can lead to improved outcomes over the longer term. In particular, access to EU funding can play a supportive role during this process and should be encouraged.

Access to, and the adequate provision of, services for children and young people from disadvantaged communities and groups should

be improved (AT, FI, HR, SE, SK). National plans to reform existing services or implement new ones should include an evaluation of the current situation for disadvantaged communities and specific measures to address potential gaps in provision. National governments should ensure that National Coordinators of services for children and young people from disadvantaged communities have the necessary resources to accomplish their role and involve children and relevant stakeholders.

Mental health and the emotional wellbeing of children must be included as a key priority for service provision (AT, DK, ES, FI, LV, PL, SE, SK). In particular, as a first step attention should be paid to children within the care system, to improve their mental health and wellbeing, as well as other healthcare issues. Multi-disciplinary teams, which include mental health professions, should also be considered.

Long-Term Care (Principle 18 of the European Pillar of Social Rights)

Key issues and Policy Developments

Four key issues related to long-term care services, common to many countries, emerged from the analysis of the questionnaires.

- Inadequate resources and insufficient long-term planning for the needs of an ageing population;
- A shortage of workers and inadequate levels of training;
- The distribution of competences across various levels of government;
- The need to continue the development of community-based care models.

The majority of respondents highlighted the demographic challenges faced in their countries due to Europe's ageing population (AT, BE, DK, EE, ES, HR, IE, MT, SE, SK) and within this, the importance of adequate resourcing for long-term care services. The current situation in many countries is regarded as unsustainable with an increasing number of older people either receiving poor quality care or no support at all (e.g. ES, IE). The under-resourcing of long-term care, both residential and community-based care, is combined with insufficient financial planning to provide for future need. In some instances (e.g. EE), while state health insurance covers the provision of healthcare, there is no comparable system for social care which is often funded from general taxation.

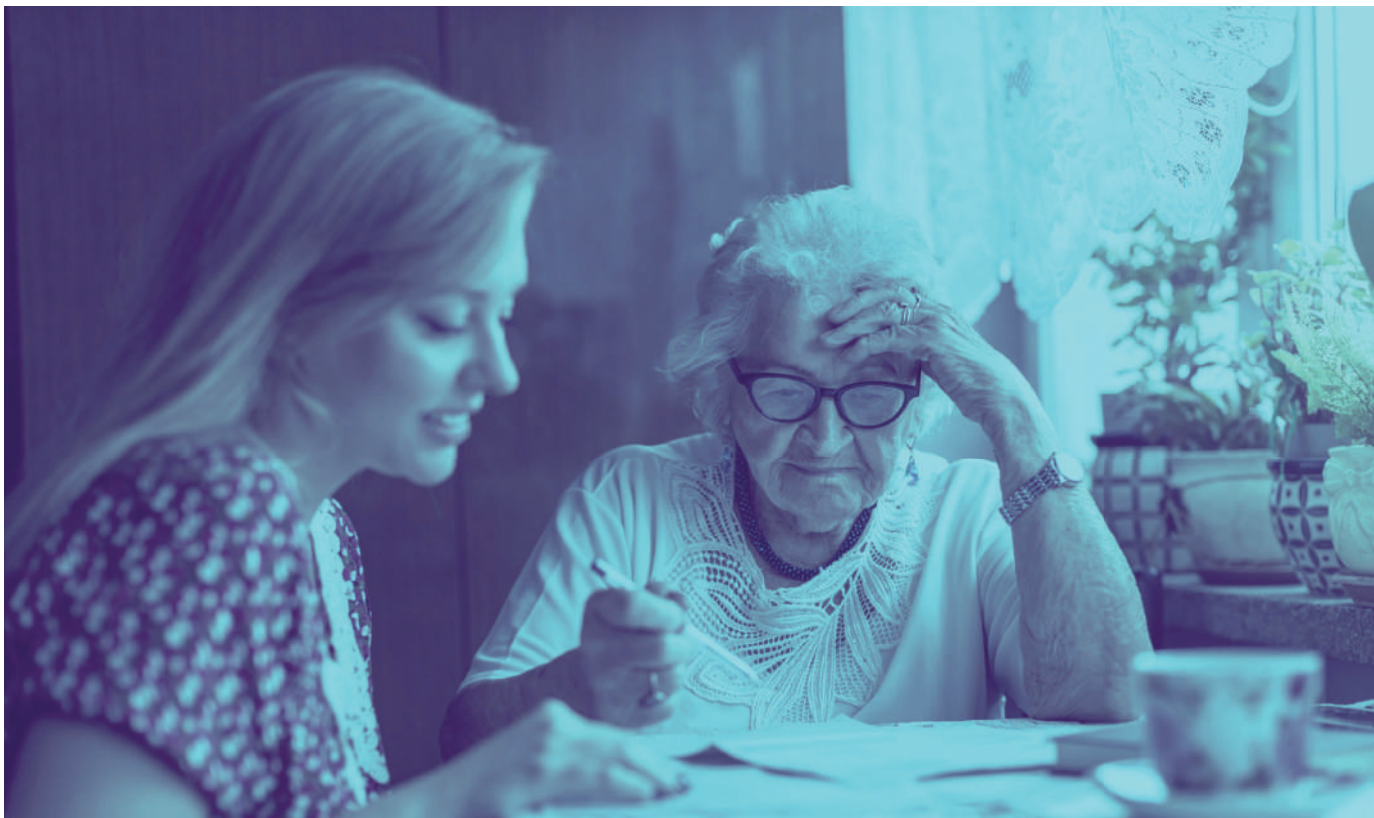
In Slovenia the Long-Term Care Act (2021) is founding a new pillar of social security with the aim of establishing a stable, financially sustainable system that will make long-term care accessible, and available to people in need. The reform enables long-term care beneficiaries to access comparable services in both home and residential settings, which is a basic requirement for the strengthening of care to ensure the needs of an ageing population are met.

For countries receiving EU funding as part of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), there are concerns about its long-term sustainability. For example, as part of its NRRF, Sweden is implementing its Elderly Care Boost, which aims to transform the care system into one which is person-centred. Without sufficient planning for future resources there are concerns that projects within NRRPs will be a temporary boost for the sector but will limit their longer-term potential.

The provision of long-term care often relies on migrant labour. Even before the pandemic inadequate levels of staffing had been an issue for most countries, but the situation has become more challenging in the post-pandemic context (AT, DK, EE, HR, IE, LV, SE, SI). In October 2020, to ensure adequate and safe levels of staffing, Finland introduced legislation on minimum staffing levels for housing units with 24-hour assistance, as well as residential facilities for older people. By 2023, the minimum staffing level will be 0.7 employees per client. While this is a welcome development, concerns remain over the extent to which this can be achieved given current staff shortages.

Relative to other professions, low pay is a common feature of workers within the social care sector, some of which is related to inadequate funding. In addition to pay, working conditions can also be less attractive which negatively impacts recruiting and retaining workers. The pandemic has further aggravated the situation of longer working hours, increased levels of stress, and a deterioration in wellbeing and resilience. In response, some countries are trying to improve the situation. For instance, in Austria a long-term care apprenticeship is being promoted to attract, recruit and retain staff. Furthermore, the attractiveness of care jobs has been improved by the addition of bonus payments to staff for the next two years.

Care workers often require further training to improve the quality of care (e.g. FI, FR, SE). However, there are often inadequacies within, or absences of, nationally agreed minimum training and vocational standards for care workers.



Delivery of long-term care services is often a shared competence between national, regional and local authorities, as well as social and health services in the public and private sectors. The distribution of competences between the various levels of government, public and non-public organisations may prove challenging in terms of availability of services, policy coherence and financing. In particular, the provision of integrated care was considered to be a challenge in many countries (AT, CZ, EE, ES, LV SK, PL, RO).

In Latvia, provision of health and social care remains fragmented. The two systems operate as separate entities, each with their own financing, staff, and locations with the result that people with long-term care needs continue to be negatively impacted by the situation.

There is a similar situation in Czechia, and this fragmentation was highlighted by our respondent as one of the most pressing challenges. Despite limited progress in this area, there has been a clear shift in the perception of the policy problem in important national social policy documents, including Czechia's Strategy for the Development of Social Services (2016-2025).

Meanwhile in Estonia, a major challenge is the limited exchange of data between health and social services, leading to duplication on data collection and inefficient data-processing. This further constrains limited resources and complicates the ability of policymakers to make evidenced-based policy decisions.

Within the governance of long-term care, there is often an unequal provision of care across different regions, which remains a concern within some countries (CZ, EE, HR, RO, PO). This is linked to ensuring the availability of social services in smaller towns and rural areas, as they have limited possibilities to provide community-based care. In Estonia, the challenge of providing long-term care in rural areas has created a situation whereby larger metropolitan areas are attracting people in need, as it is easier to access services. This places a disproportionate burden on larger municipalities, which do not have the resources to cover this increased need of care beyond residents.

In recent years there have been improvements in providing more community-based care in some countries, but the pace and scale of reform is often a challenge (AT, BE, CZ, EE, ES, FR, HR, MT, RO). Spain is currently review-

ing its model of long-term care with the aim of moving towards an inclusive system and greater emphasis on community-based care.

The Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030 opened a call under the RRF to third-sector providers to conduct innovative projects in the prevention of institutionalisation and to change the model of care. Similarly, one of the objectives of the Long-term Care Act (2021) in Slovenia is to provide service users with a comparable level of quality service between residential and community-based care thereby ensuring individuals have a genuine choice between the two. Meanwhile in Austria the affordability of community-based long-term care services has become an issue as individuals are required to contribute relatively high out-of-pocket payments to receive them.

Key Recommendations

Respondents highlight the need to ensure that systems of long-term care are adequately resourced both within the short and longer-term (AT, BE, DK, EE, ES, HR, IE, SE, SK). Europe's ageing population, combined with a diminishing workforce, presents a unique set of financial challenges for which there is mainly limited long-term planning. Long-term care is often funded by general taxation and the sector can be subjected to one-off cash injections which may produce ad hoc and unsustainable reforms.

Related to the issue of financial resources is the ability of the sector to both attract and maintain adequate levels of staffing at all levels and within all organisations (AT, DK, EE, HR, IE, LV, SE, SI). Historically, migrant workers have been used to plug gaps, but as we realised during the Covid-19 pandemic, such system is unsustainable. In addition to pay, ESN members recommended to pay attention to working conditions, particularly around adequate training, career progression and stress-management.

The integrated provision of long-term care requires careful attention (AT, CZ, EE, ES, LV, SK, PL, RO). This integrated provision should be achieved by improving coordination between

health and social care. In such circumstances there is a need to develop comprehensive frameworks of governance and ways of working.

The emphasis on deinstitutionalisation and an expansion of community-based care should continue to be monitored and extended (AT, CZ, EE, ES, FR, HR, RO). In situations whereby community-based care remains under-developed, funds should be directed to build capacity (e.g.CZ). Meanwhile, in situations where community-based care lacks clear governance frameworks (e.g.EE) there is a need for national legislation, which can be adapted to local circumstances.

Housing and Assistance for Homeless People (Principle 19 of the European Pillar of Social Rights)

Key issues and Policy Developments

Three key issues related to support for homeless people, common to many countries, emerged from the analysis of the questionnaires:

- Concerns related to both social housing and renting in the private sector.
- The need to strengthen or to develop comprehensive national strategies and frameworks to effectively fight homelessness.
- The need to collect accurate and reliable data on the prevalence of homelessness.

The vast majority of respondents highlighted the inadequate provision of social housing as a barrier to reducing homelessness (AT, BE, CZ, DK, ES, HR, IE, SI, SK, PO). A result is that homeless people often find themselves in hostels or night shelters for considerable periods of time – sometimes for longer periods of time as local authorities cannot provide affordable or social housing and may have difficulties in providing them with a rented flat in the private market.



To reduce the length of stay in temporary accommodation, in 2022 Denmark introduced a new law providing financial incentives for municipalities to find permanent accommodation for homeless people more quickly. The cost of temporary accommodation is shared by the state and municipalities for the first three months but afterwards the municipality will have to pay fully. The aim is to incentivise long-term housing solutions, but concerns remain regarding the risk of homeless people being left in hostels with rising expenditures for municipalities.

European funds such as the ERDF are currently being used in Czechia to expand the stock of social housing for the most vulnerable, with a planned 2,350 social units. Given the nature of ERDF funding, there is some geographical variation in terms of this provision and concerns over the extent to which municipalities can match EU funds with their own funding. European funds have been used in Estonia to build new accessible social housing.

A general shortage of rental housing in the public and private sectors, combined with the rising costs of rent in the private sector, was raised as a concern for some respondents (DK, IE, SI). The shift from social housing to an overreliance on the more expensive private sector results in more difficulties to access housing for several populations, such as young or single parents, students, the self-employed, those in precarious jobs, the low-paid, migrants, and people with disabilities.

To address some of these issues Ireland has introduced its 'Housing for All' Strategy (2021). The plan, together with an increase in government spending, will address housing needs at all levels, aims to improve affordability and to increase access to social housing under four pillars: supporting home ownership and increasing affordability; eradicating homelessness by increasing social housing provision; increasing new housing stock; and addressing vacancy and efficient use of existing stock.



The need to strengthen holistic support services for homeless people was also mentioned by several respondents (AT, SK, SI). Homelessness is often a symptom of other issues such as mental health, addiction, disability, poverty, and abuse. Providing a long-term solution for homeless people also requires support from a variety of health and social care service providers, effective coordination between different professionals involved in providing services, and sometimes the need to further develop overlapping services.

At the same time, the need for long-term approaches which combine preventative measures and immediate interventions - such as material, social, and health support - was also considered necessary (e.g. AT, LV). This would entail greater coordination between relevant authorities, strategies to identify individuals at risk of homelessness, and the provision of specific interventions.

One such example is the 'Wohnschrim Programme' launched by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection. The programme aims

to prevent evictions due to unpaid rent because of the Covid-19 pandemic. It offers support and counselling and takes responsibility for unpaid rent hence removing the risk of forced eviction. In addition, individuals and families may be given a one-off financial payment should they wish to move to a lower rental property.

Several respondents highlighted the need for governments to either strengthen or to develop comprehensive national strategies and frameworks to effectively coordinate and manage support for homeless people (AT, BE, ES, FI, IT, LV, MT, RO, SK). In many instances the distribution of regulatory powers, both between different layers of government and organisations, is complex – e.g. national / federal states, municipalities, cities, property developers, health and social care providers, social services, charities, and NGOs. A clear division of responsibilities between the agencies responsible for the provision of support to homeless people was highlighted as key to combating the problem and ensuring sufficient funding.

In some instances, comprehensive strategies will also improve regional differences in the provision of support for homeless people. Rural areas in particular were identified as often lacking adequate services (e.g. CZ, EE, SK).

Some progress is being made in this area. For example, in response to the Lisbon Declaration on the European Platform on Combating Homelessness, and to prepare for the Belgium Presidency of the European Council in 2024, the Belgium Federal Government is developing a strategy to tackle homelessness. Together with regional governments, the strategy will first map existing services and provision with the aim of improving the coordination of responsibilities.

The issue was regarded as particularly pressing in Slovakia where almost 8 % of the population is at risk of housing exclusion. In addition, almost 200,000 Roma people living in Slovakia have no access to adequate accommodation and essential services. Though there is not a national homelessness strategy, the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family has initiated a working group to prepare its Ending Homelessness Strategy.

The collection of data on homelessness was regarded as a key challenge for several respondents (BE, HR, ES, IE, RO). Data collection within some countries often under-reported the extent of homelessness, thereby reducing the effectiveness of evidenced-based policy solutions. For example, in 2021 there were 525 homeless people registered in Croatia, but there were an estimated additional 2,000 homeless people who were unregistered. This gap results in inadequate resources being dedicated to tackling the problem. Of the 525 registered homeless people in Croatia, 27 per cent had mental health problems, thereby demonstrating that homelessness is often a symptom of other problems.

A similar situation is also evident in Ireland, where under-reporting of homelessness is common. Official statistics in Ireland only capture those who use accommodation managed by local authorities. This excludes rough

sleepers, those in hospital, prison, direct provision (asylum seeker accommodation), and couch surfers. This is despite the fact that the Irish legal definition of homelessness includes people in institutions who cannot move on due to a lack of appropriate accommodation.

The inadequacies of data collection and data harmonisation between cities in Spain is currently being addressed by the General Directorate of Family Diversity and Social Services. Over the last two years the Directorate has worked with experts from different fields (local administration, regional, state, third sector and universities) to develop a common methodology for the collection of data on persons experiencing homelessness.

Key Recommendations

Adequate levels of affordable housing constitute one of the major challenges in most countries (AT, BE, CZ, DK, ES, HR, IE, SI, SK, PO) and lack of affordable housing is regarded as one of the main drivers of homelessness.

Where European funds are used to address homelessness, our members noted that the matched-funding element of the Funds could be a barrier to projects. Creative ways to address this barrier could be explored, which would further address regional differences in the supply of social housing and support services for the homeless.

The need to strengthen holistic support and intervention services for homeless persons was mentioned by several respondents (AT, BE, ES, FI, IT, LV, MT, RO, SK). This requires effective coordination between different professionals involved in providing services for homeless persons. Furthermore, there is a need to formulate long-term approaches combining both immediate and preventative measures.

Governments should either develop (LV) or strengthen (AT, BE, ES, FI, IT, IE, SK, RO) comprehensive national strategies and frameworks to effectively address homelessness. These strategies and frameworks should in-

clude the broad range of state and non-state actors involved in tackling homelessness at the various levels of government. They should clarify different regulatory powers and competences and provide stable financial support to ensure individuals have access to the appropriate support. In some instances, changes to existing legislation may be necessary (IE, RO).

Several respondents pointed to the need to develop and implement effective data collection and monitoring systems for homeless people (BE, HR, ES, IE, RO). This data is essential to understand the key features and extent of the problem and will result in more targeted and effective policies.

Implementation of the National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs)

The answers to the questionnaires helped to come up with some preliminary cross-country conclusions regarding the implementation of the NRRPs in programmes related to social services.

The two main themes that this cross-country analysis covers on the implementation of the NRRPs are:

- Progress on investment and development of social inclusion programmes in NRRPs at national, regional and local levels.
- Knowledge of other social inclusion reforms or investments highlighted by social services either as having been initiated or planned with the recovery funds.

The analysis is based on respondents' answers to the questionnaires, but in many instances, there is limited knowledge of developments. Our 2021 report 'Funding Social Services Recovery - Anchoring social services in post-Covid national reform plans'²¹ highlighted that the participation of national, regional and

third sector representatives responsible for social services in the process of developing the NRRPs had certain weaknesses. In only three cases were authorities responsible for social services given the opportunity to submit projects to national governments (ES, FI, IT). Meanwhile, the participation of our members in national public consultations was also challenging.

It seems that communication between national governments and authorities with the responsibility for planning and implementing social services has continued to be limited. Our members reported often limited knowledge of social inclusion developments in the RRF plans. A further layer of complexity to the understanding of the RRF is related to the fact that the drafting of the NRRPs took place alongside the Partnership Agreements on EU Funds for the 2021-2027 period. With this in mind, the information gathered from the answers to our questionnaire may still not capture many developments relating to social services and social inclusion. It also points to the challenges social services face in terms of accessing information and securing funding.

Respondents to the questionnaire reported developments in four broad themes relating to social inclusion:

Long-Term Care

Projects and reforms in long-term care were highlighted in six countries (CZ, ES, IT, LV, SE, SL). The draft legislation for the implementation of programmes improving community-based care for older people is currently underway in Italy. The programme consists of 500 million euros and includes a variety of initiatives to reform community-based care and prevent the institutionalisation of older people.

In Slovenia, the new Long-Term Care Act (2021) aims to transform LTC provision. Proposed measures include setting up a one-stop shop for information on health, social

²¹ www.esn-eu.org/publications/funding-social-services-recovery-anchoring-social-services-post-covid-national-reform



protection and long-term care and for beneficiary-friendly support introduction of new services so that beneficiaries in all environments – whether at home or residential care – are supported with care to strengthening and maintaining their independence and e-services, and a higher percentage of public funds for co-financing long-term care. It is expected that these measures will reduce the amounts paid for services by beneficiaries and reduce the financial burden on local communities.²² In addition, there has been progress in the creation of a national framework for the regulation and provision of long-term care.

In Spain the Ministry of Social Rights and the 2030 Agenda has announced subsidies for the construction and renovation of residential and day care centres. In Latvia a project to improve accommodation for older people is also at planning stage.

Plans to modernise long-term care and social services are also being implemented in Czechia. The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs has announced calls for tenders that focus on the deinstitutionalisation of social services and to increase the capacity of community-based care. The plan will also include additional support for people reliant on res-

idential care, with the building or renovation of facilities.

Disability

Three countries reported the initiation of projects supporting people with disabilities (GR, IT, LV). In Latvia progress is being made to improve the accessibility of state and municipal buildings, particularly those where welfare or social services are provided. Meanwhile, adaptations to homes for people living with disabilities are also planned, with the aim of adapting 259 dwellings throughout Latvia. In Italy a project 'autonomy paths for people with disabilities' is in the early stages and will provide community-based services to ensure people living with disabilities can live independently and within the community. In Greece there are also plans to employ 1,000 professionals to support individuals with disabilities to live independently.

Social Services

The start to social services reforms was reported in three countries (ES, IT, HR). In January 2022 the Spanish Government launched a public consultation on the Draft Law on Social Services, a milestone of the Spanish NRRP.

²² www.gov.si/en/policies/health/long-term-care/

The reform will create a single framework for social services and make it possible to guarantee minimum protection and universal social services throughout Spain.

Meanwhile, in July 2021 Italy approved a national plan, which aims at improving emergency social support, professional supervision for social workers and social services teams, reducing the removal of children from their families, and providing support to vulnerable people once they are discharged from hospital.

In Croatia, the Government has adopted its National Plan for the Development of Social Services (2021-2027) and the Action Plan for the Development of Social Services (2021-2024). The intended reforms include the modernisation of social services and social care, better integration and support for vulnerable groups, and better financial support for those in need.

Homelessness

Two countries reported developments in projects related to homelessness (GR, IT). In Italy 450 million euros have been allocated to improve temporary housing for the homeless and to strengthen national coordination for the caring of homeless people or people living in extreme poverty. This will be done by promoting housing support based on the 'Housing First' models and the creation of dedicated centres to support people living in extreme poverty. Projects to provide housing for the most vulnerable and their integration within the labour market have also gathered pace in Greece.

Implementation of the RRF is still in an early phase²³ and monitoring progress of social inclusion and social services programmes remains challenging for several reasons. Projects may span across different regions within the country, the scale of the projects seems limited compared with other policy

areas funded by national RRFs and there is not much information on programmes funded with RRF. As more and more projects are implemented in the coming year, there is hope that knowledge and understanding of the process will improve but also the risk that these become temporary projects without becoming structural in the long run.²⁴

Social services support for refugees from Ukraine

This section presents the views of ESN members in their provision of social services support for people fleeing the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Our analysis is specifically designed to contribute towards more effective EC support programmes and the development of appropriate guidelines for European countries for the next EU Semester cycle.

Since the beginning of the war, the number of Ukrainian refugees arriving in neighbouring countries has rapidly increased each week affecting the work of our members in the neighbouring countries. As highlighted in the section 'Humanitarian Crisis - War in Ukraine,' with the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive everyone fleeing the war are offered a one-year residence permit (which could be extended up to three more years), access to education and the labour market.

Most refugees from Ukraine are women with children and older people. Providing them with adequate child support and child protection services (Principle 11) as well as long-term care (Principle 18) is the responsibility of their host countries. The same is true for enabling Ukrainian families and individuals to access housing (Principle 19), which is a particular challenge given the pre-existing housing shortage across the EU.

A specific aspect of the Ukrainian refugee movement is the large number of unaccompanied children who have reached EU coun-

²³ www.ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_1198

²⁴ See also: www.esn-eu.org/news/first-eu-assessment-national-recovery-plans-whats-outlook-social-services.



tries.²⁵ Such children need immediate care, preferably within families. To answer these needs, countries have opted for different approaches, also within countries themselves within their own competences. For instance, Catalonia's regional government has been recruiting emergency families, capable of hosting and supporting children deprived of parental care and put in place a system to speed up and simplify procedures to support Ukraine's unaccompanied children into families.

Young refugees need fast access to mental health support to cope with trauma, separation from a parent, and the challenges of settling into a new country. However, as highlighted in international studies, access to psychological care for children has been severely restricted across the EU for many years,²⁶ which makes it difficult to provide proper services to all children in need as highlighted by our members in several countries (AT, EE, PL, SK).

National governments have tried to facilitate the social inclusion process through the introduction of integration programmes. For example, in Czechia, adaptation groups for Ukrainian children have been set up at schools and after-school activity centres. Coordination between the welfare and education sectors will be particularly important in this context. It should be emphasised that many children, despite their stay in EU countries, continue their remote education in Ukrainian schools. Social services need to be particularly innovative to support these children.

Unfortunately, Central and Eastern European countries, where the largest numbers of Ukrainian refugees have arrived, have the lowest rates of access to early childcare.²⁷ ESN members point that existing facilities are unable to provide day care for refugee children (BE, HR, IE, PL, RO, SK).

A significant group among Ukrainian refugees are older people and people with disabilities.²⁸ They arrive in the EU at a time when the long-term care sector has long been under strong

²⁵ www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/03/ukraine-urgent-and-extra-support-needed-separated-and-unaccompanied-children.

²⁶ www.unicef.org/eu/stories/mental-health-burden-affecting-europes-children

²⁷ www.ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20200427-1.

²⁸ www.edf-feph.org/war-in-ukraine-over-143-000-persons-with-disabilities-displaced/



pressure due to demographic changes and large staff shortages (CZ, DK, EE, LV, PL, RO). Many of them do not accept being separated from their families and placed in 24-hour care facilities (IT, SK). Therefore, the general lack of investment in outreach services provided at home means that older people in need are often deprived of proper care (SK). Investment is needed in inclusive programmes specifically designed for older people, who often have specific needs whether related to language needs or social networks (EE, IT). The lack of support for them can lead to segregation and deterioration in their well-being in the long run.

Regarding housing, ESN members stress that, in the short term, it has been possible to provide accommodation for all refugees, mainly in private homes and refugee shelters (CZ, IE, IT, PL, SE). However, these are only temporary solutions. As the conflict continues, resources begin to run out, and the prolonged residence of refugees in temporary accommodation may lead to their segregation (CZ). Meanwhile, finding affordable accommodation in

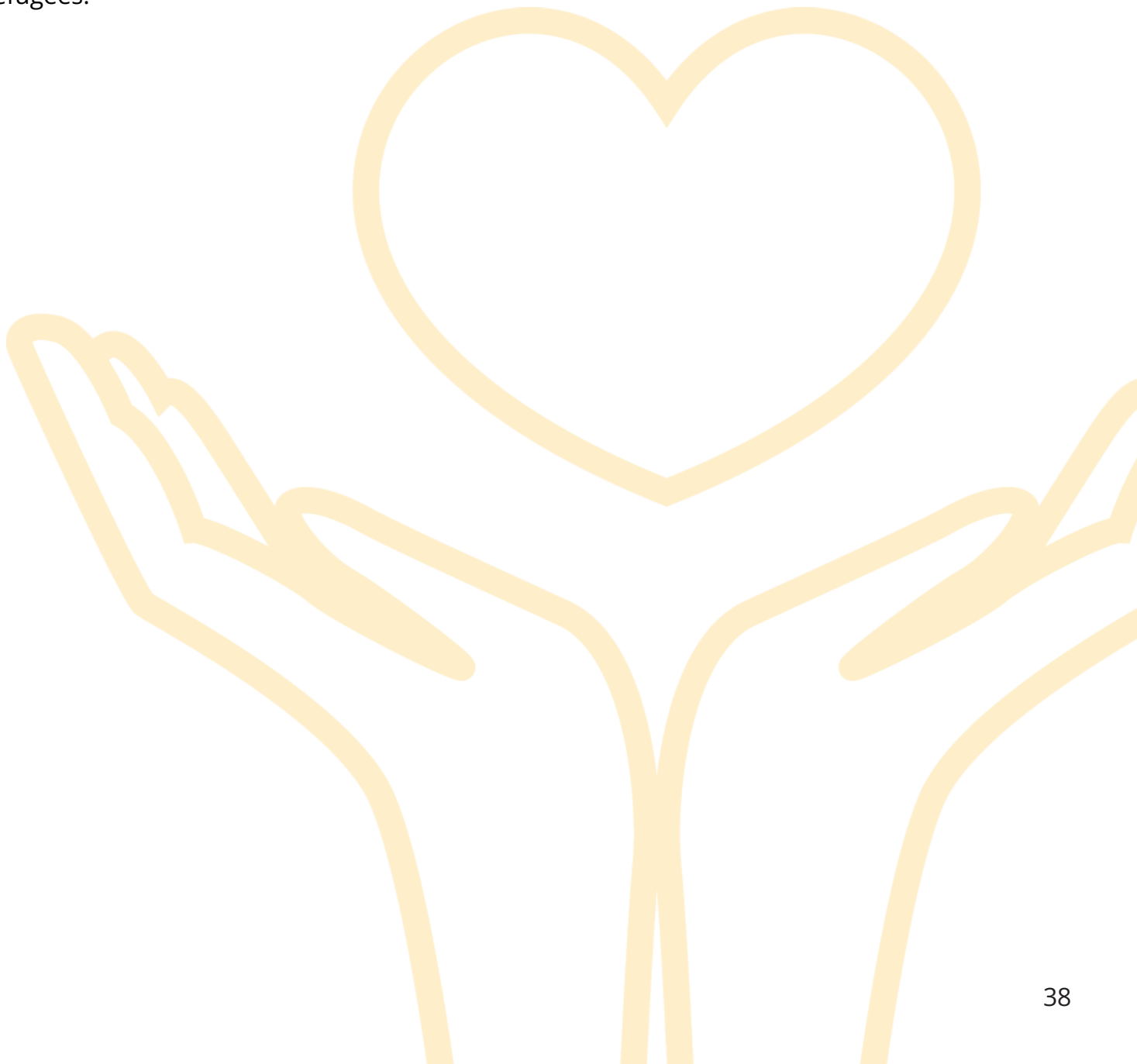
the open market is becoming increasingly difficult in many countries due to increased demand and rising prices (AT, BE, CZ, DK, EE, IE, IT, LV, PL, RO, SK).

Some European countries have undertaken relevant initiatives to address the problem. In Ireland, for example, the existing Fair Deal Scheme was updated. The Scheme relied on people requiring long-term care to cover the cost of staying in nursing homes by renting out their personal apartments. Now the rental income would go more into the private pockets of landlords, rather than into the care facilities, which is expected to encourage more people to make their properties available for rent and therefore have more properties available for refugees. The Spanish authorities have launched programmes to support refugees with housing benefits or a guaranteed minimum income. This will help to improve the current situation but will not solve the structural problems regarding the lack of available housing.

Overall, ESN members agree that the challenge ahead will be to monitor the social and economic evolution of the situation, while both defining long-term integration programmes and providing flexible services and interventions to meet the unexpected needs that emerge over time.

In conclusion, on the basis of existing data, it can be concluded that delivering quality social services which guarantee the social inclusion of the refugees is a major challenge. Existing staff shortages, limited capacity of care facilities and inadequate funding of the social services sector contribute significantly to the social inclusion of the refugees. As the war continues, long-term strategies should be developed to respond to the many challenges highlighted by the respondents in welcoming refugees.

Relevant interventions should focus primarily on supporting families and unaccompanied children, including those facing mental health issues; inclusion of older people in integration programmes and providing newcomers with adequate accommodation. ESN members should continue to document the challenges facing social services in the provision of adequate support so that we understand better the gaps and the solutions that should be put in place.





Recommendations at National Level



2023 European Semester Social Services Recommendations at National Level

These recommendations have been drafted based on the proposals made by representatives of ESN's Reference Group on the European Semester to support the drafting of the Country Specific Recommendations in 2023.

Country	Principle 11	Principle 18	Principle 19
Austria	Adopt the national action plan for the implementation of the EU Child Guarantee.	Include specific measures and targets to ensure the quality and sustainability of long-term care services in the framework of the long-term care reform.	Develop a sustainable and inclusive housing strategy, coordinated with the implementation of other national social-related strategies (e.g. on poverty eradication).
Belgium	Improve the collection of data regarding children in need and unify the regional systems of data management across the country to have a national picture.	Focus investment on smart and innovative technologies enhancing people's autonomy.	Develop an inclusive policy framework and action plan at national level to fulfil the objectives of the Lisbon Declaration on the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness.
Croatia	Develop a national legal framework to specifically support children at risk of poverty.	Address insufficient capacity of residential services and the lack of community-based services in rural area through the National Plan for the Development of Social Services.	Develop a national plan for social housing to improve the capacity of local authorities to plan and maintain social housing.
Czechia	Set up a network of preventive and support care services for vulnerable children and families to ensure that children can remain in their homes and communities.	Implement the national strategy for the development of social services, including through relevant legislative reforms.	Based on needs, study the possibility of decreasing the threshold for co-funding EU-funded social housing projects to 5% for national and local governments and 0% for NGOs.
Denmark	Increase children participation in childcare and child protection procedures.	Invest in digitalisation and assistive technology in the long-term care sector	Continue to fund housing support based on the 'housing first' approach.
Estonia	Improve the collection and management of data regarding children in need of protection.	Clearly define a portfolio of community-based services at national level and relevant standards for their implementation.	Improve the collection and management of data regarding people facing housing problems.

Country	Principle 11	Principle 18	Principle 19
Finland	Provide necessary funding for social services responsible for supporting children with mental health problems, substance misuse, and children with disabilities.	Improve recruitment and retention of staff in the long-term care sector through competitive salaries, flexible employment options and psychological support.	Launch a reliable mapping of housing needs in the country, including outside of major cities.
France	Training on the Convention on the Rights of the Child should be provided for all social services professionals working with children.	Increase the number and quality of inspections of care facilities.	Not provided.
Ireland	Improve access to formal childcare for all families by subsidising up to 70% of care costs.	Improve the recruitment and retention of staff in the long-term care sector by increasing funding for public care services.	Improve data collection on the housing needs of the population to develop an evidenced-based national housing strategy.
Italy	Improve the coordination between various sectors of child support, including social services, health, education and justice to effectively implement the National Plan for Children and Adolescents.	Ensure the equal distribution of care professionals throughout the country, particularly within the most vulnerable territories, such as mountainous areas, rural areas and small islands.	Create a single, unified system to support the homeless, including street outreach services.
Latvia	Link legislative changes that guarantee the rights of children with disabilities with the transfer of appropriate funds to the social services responsible for implementing these changes.	Invest more in human resources, including training of care professionals expected to work at the intersection of health and social services.	Develop a national housing strategy with clear measures, indicators, targets and deadlines, based on the reliable knowledge of the root causes of homelessness in the country.
Malta	Ensure an adequate level of income for most vulnerable families.	Monitor the implementation of the National Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to ensure deinstitutionalisation of long-term care services to become more community-based.	Invest in finding new ways of reaching out to homeless people who have not been reached or admitted to shelters.

Country	Principle 11	Principle 18	Principle 19
Poland	Improve access to mental health support for children and the coordination between social and health services working with children.	Adopt legislative changes to enable the introduction of flexible, community-based services tailored to the needs of the individuals.	Prioritise the provision of social housing for the homeless over placing them in homeless shelters.
Romania	Develop a comprehensive strategy to support children from vulnerable families, based on holistic support for the communities where children are raised.	Reduce the regional gap between access to long-term care services through proper service planning and channelling of funds.	Adopt an action plan with clear targets and indicators for the public policy on social inclusion of the homeless.
Slovakia	Develop a comprehensive national strategy to support vulnerable children, including Roma children.	Monitor the development of community-based social services funded from the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility.	Reform the Social Services Act to move from the current crisis intervention model of tackling homelessness to a prevention-oriented approach.
Slovenia	Promote foster care as the preferred alternative care model.	Provide adequate funding and human resources for the long-term care sector to fully implement the Long-Term Care Act.	Establish innovative housing communities, including those targeting people with special needs.
Spain	Include support for young people with mental health issues in the national action plan to implement the European Child Guarantee.	Develop standardised indicators to ensure a minimum level of quality of support provided for older people.	Evaluate and develop a follow-up plan for the 2015-2020 National Homeless People Strategy.
Sweden	Improve data collection and management regarding children in need of protection.	Include persons with disabilities and persons with mental health issues in long-term care programmes.	Provide support for homeless people in line with the 'housing first' approach.



Looking forward



Looking forward

Based on this year's analysis, the following points were made to promote and raise awareness on the role of social services in the implementation of EU social objectives at local level. Specifically, ESN and its members would like the European Commission to consider the following points as particularly relevant in developing future policies:

Improving the long-term financial sustainability of social services and care

A shrinking and greying EU has resulted in a lower tax base as well as increased demand for long-term care. However, the percentage of GDP invested in social care and social services has decreased over the years. This is reflected in millions of people now waiting for an adult social care assessment or a direct payment to begin their care, or for their care to be reviewed.

In a context of increased demand for services, short-term cash injections may not always be a viable solution to address future challenges. Therefore, members expressed concerns about the potential sustainability of some of the programmes put in place with current RRF funding and the need to ensure a long-term finance model is in place to support the fulfilment of people's rights.

Supporting workforce recruitment and retention

The delivery of good quality social services and social care relies on its workforce who play a vital role in the delivery of services. Within social services and social care there are several issues relating to the workforce which need to be addressed, including high numbers of vacancies, poor staff retention, and poor working conditions. The European Commission and national governments could play a strong role in ensuring the workforce is well supported through improving staff to population ratios, new and alternative ways of recruiting and retaining the workforce, and in particular its registration and accreditation.

Providing integrated support to reduce homelessness

While there is a lack of affordable housing across Europe, countries with larger provision of social housing have also witnessed an increase in homelessness. Therefore, housing is not enough; addressing homelessness requires focusing on the root causes of the problem while providing an integrated set of supports across housing, social, health, public realm, and employment services.

A Care Guarantee for All

Different groups in need should have a similar right to access quality care and support. A common thread across all social protection principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights is the need of support for different populations. The Pillar of Social Rights and subsequent documents like the European Care Strategy fall short of proposing the right to quality care for all those who may need care and support at a certain time in their lives. A care guarantee for all recognised in future Recommendations would bring together European initiatives on children, youth, disability, and long-term care.

European Social Network

Avenue des Arts 3-4-5
8th Floor
1210 Brussels
Belgium

info@esn-eu.org

www.esn-eu.org



@ESNsocial



European Social Network