Resilient Social Services
Building for the Future

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About the European Social Network

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.

About this briefing

This briefing has been drafted in the framework of the 2022 annual meeting of the European Social Network's 'Social Services Resilience and Transformation' Working Group that builds on the discussions in ESN's Covid-19 webinars and resilience and care continuity seminar held in 2020/21. The meeting brought together social services professionals and leaders from nineteen countries across Europe to discuss examples of responses to recent crises and to reflect on what transformations need to occur to build and develop resilient social services.

The working group, which will run until 2025, aims to increase the knowledge and capacity of public authorities to plan and manage social services in a resilient manner, and promote effective crisis management. This briefing will form the first of four total outputs from this working group that will support this objective.

This briefing clarifies the concept of resilience in relation to social services and explores what the EU is doing to support resilience-building in social services. This is followed by a short overview of priority areas for social services resilience in Europe. The briefing concludes with some of the key challenges for building future resilient social services.

The content of this briefing is based on questionnaires completed by ESN members (public social services at the local, regional, and national levels) in February-March 2022, the discussions that took place during the 2022 meeting of the social services transformation and resilience working group, and desk research. The questionnaire was intended as a tool to collect data on the status of social services' resilience-building capacities and priority areas for social services transformation. It was filled in by ESN members from the following countries: Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Croatia, Finland, France, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK.

Introduction

As the world moves from crisis to crisis, with the Covid-19 pandemic and more recently the war in Ukraine placing social services under significant pressure, resilience has become a focal point in the discussions on crisis response and recovery. Social services carry the responsibility to support those made vulnerable in times of crisis as well as their ongoing duty of care. However, after years of underinvestment, social services have been stripped considerably of the financial, human and infrastructure resources needed to provide continuing quality care.

Despite the challenges created through these rapid shifts and longer-term changes, social services have demonstrated their ability to be resilient. ESN's report 'Covid-19 Impact on Europe's Social Services' documents how the pandemic acted as a catalyst for already ongoing transformations ranging from adapting to digital ways of working to establishing new collaborations with other sectors.

Nevertheless, amid ever-evolving environmental and political contexts, change will continue to happen all around us causing turbulence and uncertainty. For social services to rise to these and future challenges in a sustainable manner there is an urgent need to invest in crisis preparedness and resilience strategies.

Understanding resilience in social services

The definition of resilience has been substantially explored in the disciplines of ecology, psychology, economics, public health, and many others. In recent times, the term has become popular in social policy and social services planning and strategies. However, despite this increased usage, there is still a need to clarify what resilience means in the social services context.[1] Therefore, this section of the briefing provides a definition of resilience and the related capacities specifically for social services.

In social services, resilience has been discussed mostly in terms of the emotional resilience and well-being of social workers.[2] This understanding, drawn from psychology, describes resilience as the process or outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences.[3] However, to have a complete picture of resilience in social services, this ability to 'bounce back' should be understood beyond only the social services professional. In fact, resilience in social services exists on three distinct yet interrelated levels: people, communities, and systems.[4]

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1 100% of respondents to the questionnaire as part of the ESN social services transformation and resilience working group stated they would like to learn more about what the concept of resilience means for social services.
2 Rose, S. and Palattiyil, G., 2018. Surviving or thriving? Enhancing the emotional resilience of social workers in their organisational settings. Journal of Social Work, 20(1), pp.23-42.
3 American Psychological Association, 2022. Resilience. [online] Dictionary.apa.org. Available at: <https://dictionary.apa.org/resilience> [Accessed 29 September 2022].
4 Ziglio, E., 2021. How can resilience as a concept help social services plan and deliver care continuity?.

People, communities, and systems

The 'people' level refers to ensuring the well-being of individuals involved in and with social services. Ensuring the well-being of the social or population groups that these individuals are a part of falls under the 'community' level. Finally, the 'system' level is the broadest of the three, encompassing all the structures that ensure the quality, accessibility, and continuity of services in times of crisis as well as in the face of global incremental changes.

Just like an ecosystem in nature, these levels are interdependent and therefore are the cause and consequence of each other's resilience. For example, if a social care worker is burned out, services are at risk of not being delivered effectively, which in turn increases the risk of social exclusion of people that are supported by these services and professionals. Resilience in social services, therefore, is about strengthening the capacity of people, communities and systems to cope with threats and adapt in response to them.[5] The table below breaks down the three levels of people, communities and systems for social services with a non-exhaustive list of examples.

People	Community	System
Social care or services worker	Workforce	Practices e.g. a service
Person supported by social services	Population groups that are supported by social services	Policies e.g. collaboration
		Funding

Resilience and vulnerability: Two sides of the same coin

Determining what resources to allocate for strengthening resilience capacities requires identifying the factors underlying the vulnerabilities of people, communities and systems. For social services, this would apply to the vulnerabilities of those supported by social services but also the workforce as well as organisational and policy aspects.

Even if it is an uncomfortable thought, vulnerability cannot be escaped or eliminated, so the most effective response is to accept it, acknowledge it and move on from it. Understood as an asset, vulnerability can help social services use challenging situations (such as failure or adversity) to grow and develop new solutions that increase resilience in the long term. In this way, vulnerability can be seen as an essential part of resilience building instead of a weakness.[6]

5 Ziglio, E., Azzopardi-Muscat, N. and Briguglio, L., 2017. Resilience and 21st century public health. European Journal of Public Health, 27(5), pp.789-790.
6 With thanks to Cornelia Walther for introducing this perspective on vulnerability as a speaker at the working group meeting.

What is capacity?

In the context of resilience, capacity refers to the ability of social services to respond to and manage crisis situations. Strengthening their capacity to do so will guarantee the continuity of social services and care, and hence their effectiveness. There are four distinct types of capacity that can be strengthened in people, communities and systems.[7]

Adaptive: capacity to accept and adapt to new situations

Example: Guidelines accounting for the threat of Covid-19 to create safe workspaces

Absorptive: capacity to cope and develop reactive actions to respond to the new situation

Example: Actions implemented as part of a crisis management plan in response to a natural disaster

Anticipatory: capacity to predict new situations and develop proactive actions in anticipation of the vulnerabilities

Example: Predictive analysis leading to strategic long-term policy-making

Transformative: capacity to transform and change to be suited for new situations that can make existing practices obsolete (this type relates mostly to systems)
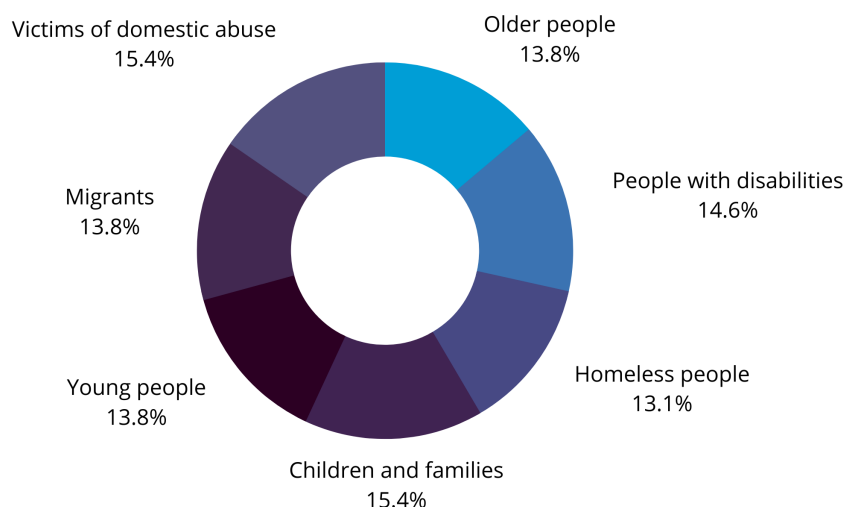
Example: Implementing active ageing programmes supporting self-care of people living longer.

How are social services in Europe building resilience?

Social services are actively working on building the resilience of their services, operations and the people connected to them. Based on the information gathered in the questionnaires as part of the social services resilience and transformation working group, we can provide a snapshot of the status of the resilience-building capacities and priority areas for building the resilience of public social services at the local, regional, and national levels.
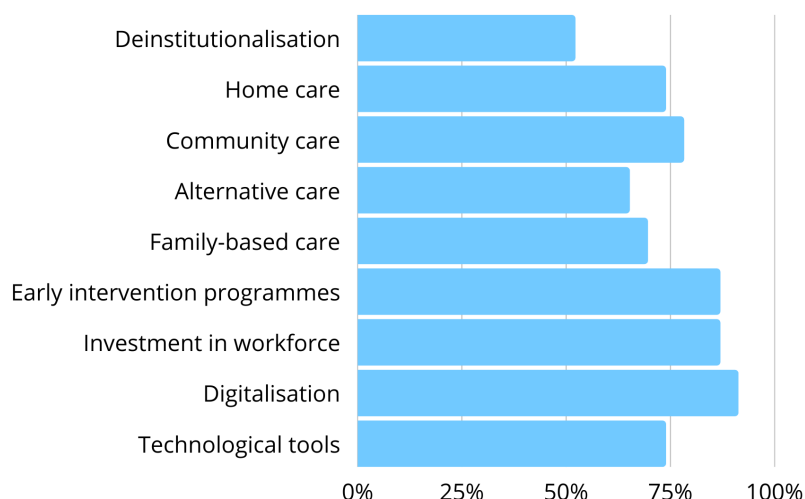
7 World Health Organization. Regional Office for Europe, 2017. Building resilience: a key pillar of Health 2020 and the Sustainable Development Goals: examples from the WHO Small Countries Initiative. World Health Organization. Regional Office for Europe.

Populations in need to be made more resilient

Victims of domestic abuse
15.4%

Older people
13.8%

People with disabilities
14.6%

Migrants
13.8%

Homeless people
13.1%

Young people
13.8%

Children and families
15.4%

All population groups that are supported by social services were considered close to equal priority to be made more resilient. By a small margin, children and families and victims of domestic abuse were rated with the greatest need.

Priority areas to strengthen resilience in social services

Deinstitutionalisation
Home care
Community care
Alternative care
Family-based care
Early intervention programmes
Investment in workforce
Digitalisation
Technological tools

0%   25%   50%   75%   100%

In terms of priority areas of organisational and service transformation, digitalisation was rated as the highest priority by the majority. Early intervention programmes and investment in workforce followed close behind.
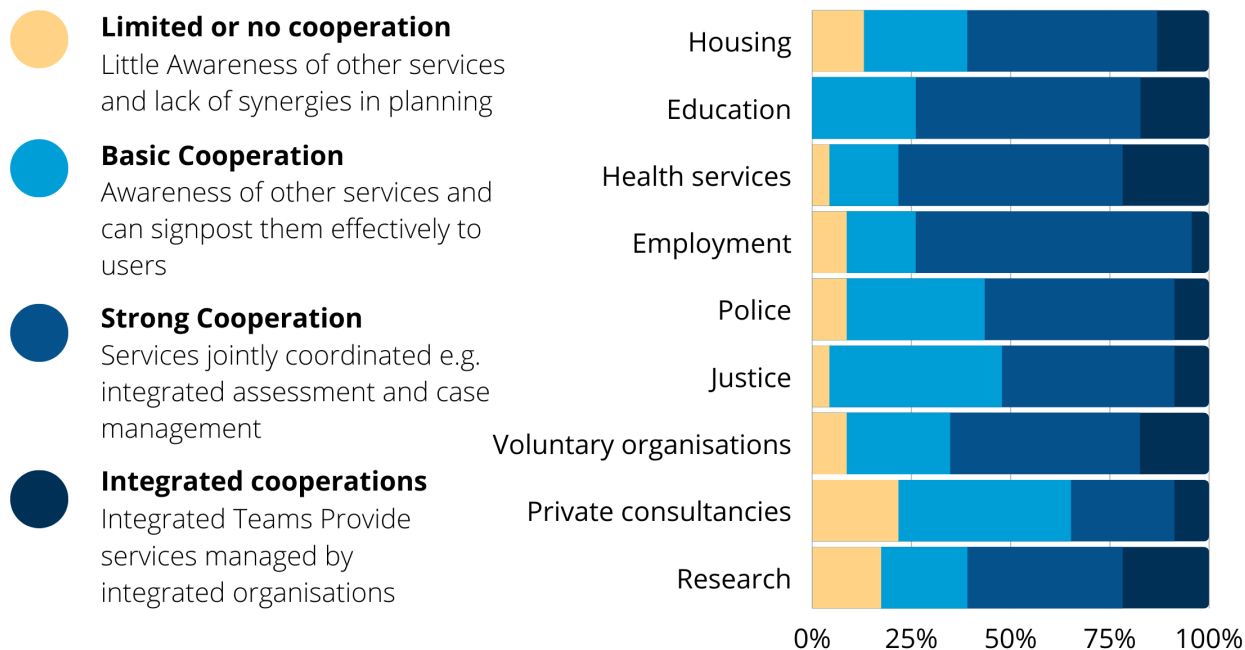
How is the EU supporting resilience building in social services?

The EU has several legislative and financial mechanisms that play a strategic and supporting role in building social services resilience. One of those legislative tools is the European Pillar of Social Rights which can be seen as a roadmap to resilience for social services. The principles 11, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, and 20 and accompanying initiatives relevant to social services promote fair and well-functioning social protection systems and support social convergence.

The Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support plays a support role by offering on-request operational and analytical support to Member States to implement policy reforms to make their welfare systems more robust.

The current 2021-2027 long-term EU budget and emergency instruments offer a wide range of funding opportunities to build sustainable and resilient social services, such as The European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) and the Recovery and Resilience Fund (RRF), as part of a recovery plan for Europe named 'NextGenerationEU'.

Cooperation across sectors in the delivery of services

Limited or no cooperation
Little Awareness of other services and lack of synergies in planning

Basic Cooperation
Awareness of other services and can signpost them effectively to users

Strong Cooperation
Services jointly coordinated e.g. integrated assessment and case management

Integrated cooperations
Integrated Teams Provide services managed by integrated organisations

Cooperating with other sectors to provide a holistic approach to the needs of people supported by social services is a cornerstone of a robust social services system in times of crises. Health and education were indicated as sectors social services have the highest level of cooperation with 21.74% and 17.39% of respondents respectively stating they have integrated organizations with these sectors.

Budget for transformations and/or resilience planning in social services

43.5% responded **YES**

56.5% responded **NO**
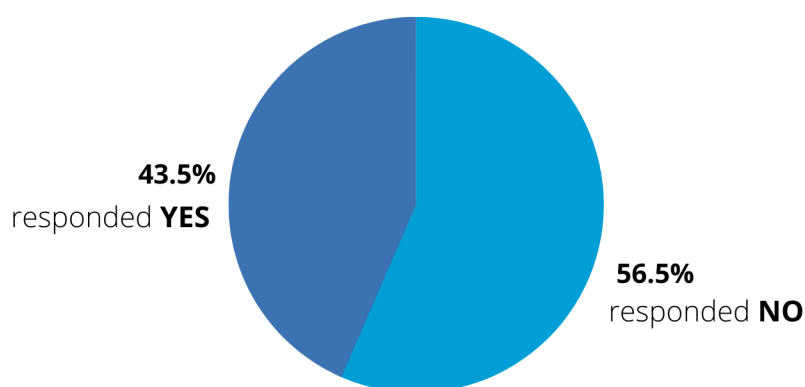
Just under half of respondents said that there is budget for transformation and/or resilience planning, which they indicated was going to areas such as deinstitutionalisation: community and home-based services; programmes preventing burnout of professionals; designing a new model of social services/strategic reforms; research; innovation; and post-Covid recovery. A possible explanation for the significant number of social services that do not allocate a budget specifically for resilience is that it is already included in other budgets instead of having a standalone budget.

Future resilient social services

Over the years, notably during the Covid-19 pandemic, social services have demonstrated a great capacity to improve the resilience of their workforce, the people they support, communities and social welfare systems. However, the ESN social services resilience and transformation working group meeting was also an opportunity to reflect on what challenges remain for social services themselves to become more resilient. Below are some recommendations for future work in the framework of the working group based on the conclusions identified in the discussions as key aspects of resilient social services

Recommendations for social services

Human experience at the centre

The route to resilience for social services lies in putting the human experience and all its complexities at the centre of the work of social services. In practice, for example, this translates into developing social services support programmes that are designed based on the needs of the person and finding solutions in an integrated and personalised manner because human beings themselves are multi-dimensional.

Moving from deficit to assets-based approaches

In the development of social services, a narrative shift needs to be made from a deficit (what is not working) to an assets-based approach. In practice, this means, for example, putting in place eco-systems of care and support that not only take into account people's needs but also their assets, and put in place services and programmes revolving around the person.

Sharing good practice

Part of resilience building is being open to learning from others. There is a need to continue utilising our international networks and share good practices to improve social services' understanding of how to build resilient and robust organisations that continue providing quality care and support also in times of crisis.

Good management leads to resilience

Key components of resilient social services include:

- **Planning long-term** will strengthen financial support and budget management.

- Promoting an organisational culture of **strategic mindfulness** for future and sometimes unforeseeable events to ensure proactive actions in response. For instance, providing support in stressful and sometimes unforeseeable circumstances to guarantee the continuity of care and support.

- Organisational structures with a clear purpose orientation that facilitates **innovation**.

Enhancing prestige of social services, social work, and social care

Across Europe, societies do not attach much importance to the essential role of social services and social care. The Covid-19 crisis highlighted the key role social services play in supporting vulnerable populations by cushioning the worst impact. This recognition needs to be sustained considering the difficulties faced by social services professionals to support increasing numbers of people in need. The media and social services' own communication channels, through spreading positive stories and covering their challenges, can play an important role in this. Social services campaigns at the national and EU levels can play a crucial role in raising awareness about the importance of social services in improving the lives of the people with whom they work with daily.

Recommendations for policy-makers at national and European levels

Harmonising workforce qualifications across the EU

In order to address the most urgent needs across Europe, social care and services workers should be able to freely transfer their skills and profession across borders. The legislative framework that facilitates this harmonisation of registration, training and development is lacking at present. The Directive 2005/36/EC, which allows EU citizens to transfer their qualifications and skills between member states, could be amended to include the social work profession. This would make it easier for employers and public authorities to recognise qualifications held by EU nationals and would help to address the recruitment gap that exists in many EU countries.

Bringing EU funding closer to the needs of social services

With the numerous challenges social services are facing, solidarity is now more important than ever. A reason for optimism is the numerous funding opportunities available at EU level. However, most EU funds are administered indirectly[8], which means that social services apply for EU funding through the national or regional managing authorities who manage EU funds. Unfortunately, the managing authorities often lack insight into the specific needs of social services.

Managing authorities should cooperate more closely with the authorities responsible for planning social services programmes during the budget planning phase to ensure the call for proposals reflects better the actual needs and target effective social services interventions.

Supporting social services in the management of EU funds

Aside from receiving EU funding, the administrative procedures related to the monitoring of these funds are also an integral part of their management. Social services teams can sometimes be lacking a specialist or have to invest their already limited resources in developing tools to deal with these administrative burdens as part of receiving EU funds. These difficulties can result in social services, particularly in local authorities, being discouraged from making use of EU funds.

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8 Indirect management: a managing authority is chosen by the European Commission to manage the project concerned on its behalf.

By introducing Simplified Cost Options[9], the European Commission has already taken positive steps to simplify these administrative burdens and enable more efficient absorption of EU funds. One further step could be easy-to-follow guidelines accompanying each EU funding programme that explain the implementation procedure of the programme and the financial rules.

9 Simplified Cost Options (SCOs) are an innovative way of reimbursing grants and repayable assistance. Instead of reimbursing 'real costs', SCOs allow reimbursing expenditure according to predefined methods based on process, outputs or results. SCOs can take the form of flat rate financing, standard scales of unit costs, and lump sums.

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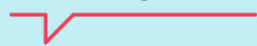
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