

Austria

Each year, the ESN European Semester Group follows the European Commission's cycle of policy coordination with EU Member States known as the European Semester and produces a report based on a questionnaire completed by public social services authorities on the social situation in European countries with a particular focus on social services. This country profile identifies the most important common challenges facing social services as reported by ESN members in Austria, related to three principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights and makes recommendations for the 2023 European Semester. The full report, with cross-country analysis of all the participating countries is available [here](#).

1. Childcare and support to children

1.1. Key issues

Since 2013, laws regarding care services for children and young people have been enacted at federal rather than state level. This means that children's rights regarding welfare and sufficient support are not the same across the country. For example, in some federal states, welfare benefits are reduced as the number of children in a family increases. This is a serious problem, as around 368,000 children and adolescents live at risk of poverty, which is one in five children in Austria (Statistik Austria 2022)¹.

Lack of access to mental health support is another major problem, especially for children living in low-income families. In general, psychological counselling centres have long waiting lists for children with public insurance. Finally, the lack of qualified staff prevents the exercise of children's right to quality child protection and support services. A national action plan setting out how the Austrian government will implement the Council Recommendation on the implementation

of the EU Child Guarantee has not yet been submitted despite the Commission's deadline of 15 March 2022.

1.2. Recommendations

A national action plan for the implementation of the EU Child Guarantee should be adopted as soon as possible. It should include clear provisions on the collection of data on children's needs and on the monitoring and evaluation of actions taken. The development of the plan should take place with the active participation of all stakeholders concerned, above all children and their families.

2. Long-term care

2.1. Key issues

The availability of care services remains a key issue despite a 1.8 per cent increase in long-term care benefits in January 2022 and the removal of the requirement to refer to personal and family assets. Alleviating measures have been compromised by rising inflation, as there is no automatic indexation of long-term care allowances. Out-of-pocket payments for

¹ <https://www.statistik.at/statistiken/bevoelkerung-und-soziales/einkommen-und-soziale-lage/armut>.

community-based care remain relatively high, so people often use the services of live-in migrant carers (“24-Stunden-Betreuerinnen”). To address these ongoing key issues a long-term care reform was announced several years ago, but the pandemic and other crises (including several changes in government) has delayed its implementation. This is now being partly addressed by the introduction of 150 pilot projects for community nursing, funded with about €54.2 million from the EU National Resilience and Recovery Programme. The first pilot projects began in April 2022.

The lack of integrated care structures has become particularly visible during the pandemic, when more communication and coordination between health and social care services was needed. The lack of (qualified) care workers remain still a challenge - the number of unfilled positions has increased by 10% over the past two years.² To address this issue a care reform was announced by the Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection on 12 May 2022 and adopted in July 2022.³ The Ministry will invest €1 billion in a two-year programme for care worker bonus payments and scholarships to attract care professionals and apprentices from non-EU countries, such as Ukraine. In addition, family carers will receive higher compensation payments.

2.2. Recommendations

A more comprehensive long-term care reform should address all the aforementioned issues. In particular, it should include development of specific measures and targets to ensure the quality and sustainability of care services, missing from the current proposal.

3. Housing and assistance for homeless people

3.1. Key issues

Austria has in place a complex system of various socio-political measures to provide the population with adequate housing. The rise in homelessness seen in Austria over the past 10 years indicates that social and housing policy problems continue to increase. In addition, the current crisis has impacted this rise through indicators such as rising rents, availability and (over) use of homeless support services over time, etc. Short-term solutions such as investment in homeless shelters have made the problem of homelessness less visible, but they are not an adequate and sustainable solution. The 2019 reform of the Community Housing Allowances Act has impacted the access to affordable housing by decreasing this access to certain population groups. This is due to the criteria to access subsidies which depends on citizenship status, residence, or period of registration, as well as knowledge of the German language.

To address this issue the Austrian government launched recently a new programme called „Wohnschirm“⁴ of €24 million, to avoid evictions of tenants under financial strain. The new “WOHNSCHIRM” Programme is seen as a step forward as it considers the housing situation of the affected household members. It offers social work counselling and, if necessary, a one-time financial assistance to pay off rent arrears or move to more affordable housing.

3.2. Recommendations

To effectively end homelessness, the Austrian Government should not only adopt an appropriate legal framework, but also develop and implement a sustainable and inclusive housing strategy, coordinated with the implementation of other national social

² <https://broschuerenservice.sozialministerium.at/Home/Download?publicationId=722>.

³ https://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/PR/JAHR_2022/PK0840/index.shtml#

⁴ www.wohnschirm.at

strategies, such as poverty eradication. Discriminating regulations in the Community Housing Benefits Act should also be revoked to ensure access for all residents in need, despite their origin.



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