



Joint proposals on the future of social services

Eurodiaconia and the European Social Network

INTRODUCTION

Social services are a fundamental part of social protection systems across the EU and play a key role in improving people's lives. They have been defined by the European Commission (EC) as the cornerstone of our social welfare systems, key to ensure people's social inclusion. Social services are one of the most heterogeneous strands of social protection systems, hence a thorough understanding of social services in their different facets is crucial. These facets include aspects such as the regulatory framework governing their management, financing and provision, the different types of providers involved in their delivery and the scope and effectiveness of the tools aimed at defining, measuring, and assessing the quality of social services and their impact. Social services are also a lever for delivering on the political commitment of the EU to promote social inclusion, employment, and cohesion. Therefore, social services cut across EU policy strategies and initiatives to promote sustainable employment and inclusive growth, especially in the wake of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is recognised that the organization, delivery and funding of social services is a national, regional or local government competence. Nonetheless, Member States are required to comply with EU law when a service is an economic activity – which happens in most circumstances. The interplay among the different levels (EU, national, regional and local) leads to complex legal, regulatory and funding frameworks across and within countries.

These joint proposals of Eurodiaconia and the European Social Network (ESN) have been drafted in light of the recent report that the High-Level Expert Group on the Future of the Welfare State published at the request of the European Commission. Social Services are an essential part of the future of the welfare state in Europe. ESN and Eurodiaconia bring together over 230 public authorities responsible for social services and non-for-profit providers of social services across Europe and we therefore wish to combine our knowledge and experience to ensure a positive ecosystem for the social services that are needed today and in the future. Therefore, in light of the High-Level Group report, we have worked together to develop these common proposals. Our proposals are presented as recommendations for the European Commission and for national governments.

It is more important than ever to ensure that social services are a priority investment in Europe. Europe is currently facing several challenges - an ageing population, Russia's war on Ukraine, and rising energy costs highlight the need for more and diverse solutions in the social services sector. The COVID-19 pandemic brought sharp visibility to the challenges the sector had been facing, including under-investment in the sector, workforce shortages, questions around the procurement of services and the sustainability of current financing models.

These joint proposals address the main trends, challenges, and opportunities in social services from three main angles:

- implementation of EU legal and policy frameworks;
- financing;
- and challenges intrinsic to the sector, such as workforce related matters, digitalisation related trends and the growing complexity and evolution of the needs of people using social services.

1.PUBLIC PROCUREMENT

Public procurement should be used as the tool to ensure that contracting between public authorities as funders and providers guarantee the quality of social services by means of standards and criteria that are set out in the contracts.

The best price-quality ratio, rather than just the most cost-effective option, should be at the centre of any contract awarded by the purchasing authorities. Yet the implementation of EU rules on public procurement remains a challenge. Due to tight local budgets and lack of understanding of public procurement social clauses by financing authorities, contracts for social services continue to be awarded in multiple occasions based on the lowest price or cost, which affects the quality of services provided.

To the European Commission:

- Encourage national and regional governments and local authorities to develop strategies on socially responsible public procurement (SRPP).
- Support national, regional and local authorities to develop criteria to better implement the price-quality ratio concept in social services procurement.

To national, regional, and local authorities:

Capacity building:

- Organise joint training sessions on social procurement clauses for finance monitoring to build capacity among authorities in making good use of those clauses. Develop guidelines, disseminate good practice, set up helpdesks, support structures, in particular on the light regime and quality criteria for social services, for the benefit of contracting authorities, suppliers, and auditors, including with EU funding support.

A holistic approach

- Make more extensive use of pre-market consultations, division of contracts into lots, reserved contracts, social considerations in award criteria and contract performance clauses, to enable the participation in public procurement contracts of smaller locally-based organisations.
- Progress towards social services outcome-based commissioning where the contract specifies expectations in terms of life quality improvement
- Involve people using social services and their families/carers at all the stages of the commissioning cycle such as needs assessment, specification of tenders, procurement, delivery and inspection.

2. SOCIAL INNOVATION

The development and implementation of new ideas to meet social needs and create new social relationships and collaboration is being incorporated by social services. Such innovation requires rigorous testing and upscaling and may provide significant insights into how social services need to develop to better meet the needs of users. However, there is still a challenge to persuade European and national authorities to take up and finance in a regular and sustainable way social services innovation.

Social innovation still needs substantial investment to ensure continuity and upscaling and should be a partnership between commissioning and delivering organisations. Innovation is crucial to ensure that services continue to respond to arising social needs and the associated demands of service users. Promoting innovation in service provision is, therefore, key to guarantee the continued relevance of the principles outlined in the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR).

To the European Commission:

- Promote the use of social innovation by providing incentives for investment in social services, including innovation in social services, in an enabling economic governance framework and acknowledges their essential role to ensure the cohesion and well-being of our societies.
- Develop a coherent and regular stream of funding to ensure the scaling-up of successful social experimentation and social innovation projects. This should also aim at maximising the effective use of EU funding, including by pooling together resources from different funding programmes.
- EU policies should promote a variety of measurements and clearly linked indicators to short-term and long-term outcomes. Working with stakeholders – social services managers, practitioners and people using social services – to test and adapt the framework, is key to ensure the process is successful.

To national, regional and local authorities:

- Strike a balance in funding between the experimentation of new approaches and ensuring the sustainability of proved meaningful innovations in the medium to long-term, for which it is also important to secure funding.
- Ensure the continuity of support for innovative services to respond to new social needs including in times of crisis.

3. INTEGRATION OF SOCIAL SERVICES TO BETTER RESPOND TO COMPLEX NEEDS

Social and care services user's needs are becoming increasingly complex. Coordination of authorities and services can help address this complexity, create synergies, while avoiding overlaps. It is required across all service levels, from design to delivery and evaluation, and should ideally result in a more effective use of human and financial resources.

To the European Commission:

- Disseminate good practice on improved coordination between services, including those funded by European Structural Investment Fund (ESIF) and other EU funds, in collaboration with EU-level networks, regional and local authorities, and Managing Authorities.
- In light of the growing complexity of the care and social needs of people using social services, support Member States to prioritise investment in the integrated provision of care and to foster improved cooperation between health care, long-term care and other types of social services.

To national, regional and local authorities:

- Assess and develop coordination between healthcare and long-term care, specifically by developing the provision of healthcare and long-term care at home, when possible, through the combined use of support provided at home and digital tools.
- Redesign the whole set of supports to prevent large numbers of people living in residential facilities, and instead have them living in their homes and communities for as long as they wish.

4. SOCIAL SERVICES AS KEY PILLAR OF ACTIVE INCLUSION STRATEGIES

Social services play a central role in promoting social inclusion, which is a key component in implementing the principles enshrined in the European Pillar of Social Rights. Social services should be at the forefront in the design and implementation of comprehensive strategies for active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market as well as inclusive access to support and social services.

To the European Commission:

- Following up on the recently adopted Council Recommendation on adequate Minimum Income, ensure that social services are well equipped to support the implementation of minimum income schemes and promote person-centred pathways to active inclusion.
- Ensure Member States invest in integrated support, including person-centred social services, for people at risk of poverty and social exclusion such as beneficiaries of minimum income, through recommendations provided in the framework of the European Semester policy coordination cycle, national programmes funded by EU Recovery Funds, and programmes supported by the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+).

To Member States:

- Design and implement adequate and effective active inclusion strategies. These involve holistic needs assessments, determining the adequacy of financial support for a life in dignity, combining minimum income with quality employment and social services support, removing barriers to the labour market, enabling faster applications through digital means where best suited, and referring to other services like health or childcare as determined by the needs assessment.

5. DE-INSTITUTIONALISATION, SHIFT TO COMMUNITY-BASED SERVICES, HOME-CARE PROVISION AND PROMOTION OF INDEPENDENT LIVING

De-institutionalisation is an ongoing process across different Member States. Reforms have been implemented for decades and require significant investments, whether on infrastructure or the workforce. The drive towards the development of community care should put people at the centre of decision making on where to live and ensure different options to make their choice.

To the European Commission:

- In cooperation with Member States, ensure that EU funding effectively supports the transition from institutional to community-based care, by means of monitoring, policy guidance, technical assistance and capacity-building of managing and planning authorities, and providers. This process should ensure that before large-scale residential institutions are closed, quality alternatives are in place following a step-by-step process.
- Ensure that central to all EU policy initiatives is the right for persons to live in their home as long as they wish and that communities are provided with the right type of support to make it happen.

To national, regional and local authorities:

- Ensure that budget cuts due to the economic crisis do not hinder the implementation of de-institutionalisation processes and continue to fund these also by pooling efficiently resources from social, health and infrastructure budgets, including with the support of EU funding.
- Move towards care models that focus on prevention and family support, upholding children and young people's best interest, and promoting a community and home-based approach for people with disabilities and older adults.

6. QUALITY OF SOCIAL SERVICES

The Voluntary European Quality Framework for Social Services (VEQFSS) from 2010 aimed at developing a common understanding on the quality of social services within the EU by identifying principles of quality characterising such services. It also proposed methodological guidelines to help public authorities organise and finance social services to develop tools for defining, measuring and evaluating the quality of social services. The implementation of the VEQFSS is voluntary and we observe that the level of quality standards for social services varies significantly within the EU.

To the European Commission:

- The EU should continue supporting the development of EU-wide principles and standards that can be shared, help support ongoing improvement and ensure consistency.
- Formulate clear targets and benchmarks for social performance in the context of the European Pillar of Social Rights' individual principles and the European Semester, to assess quality of services (and benefits).
- Promote a review of the 2010 Voluntary European Quality Framework on Social Services to ensure its principles and dimensions are up to date with current best practices and high-quality standards.

To national, regional and local authorities:

- Regularly review existing quality frameworks to assess if they cover at least all the dimensions of quality enshrined in the Voluntary European Quality Framework on Social Services. At least, ensure that quality frameworks and standards focus not only on regulatory aspects (such as facilities requirements, or staff-users ratio), but also on the well-being of social services users and the workforce.

7.FUNDING AND FINANCING

Sustainable financing is crucial now more than ever to guarantee the long term provision of social services, but the lack of sufficient funding threatens the sustainability of care provision and other key social services in our societies. Public expenditure and Investment in social services have not improved in current times.

To the European Commission:

- Establish a regular dialogue, cooperation and coordination between the different Directorate Generals (DGs) and departments in charge of different funding programmes to ensure that Member States' programming and monitoring of National Resilience and Reform Plans (NRRPs), ESIF and the Structural Reform Support Programme (SRSP), is strategic, coherent and adequate to steer the necessary reforms and investment in social services.
- Ensure that EU funding plays a transformative role in shaping social services and social infrastructures that is additional to (and not the replacement of) national and regional budgets.
- Provide guidance to Member States to ensure sustainability of social services beyond EU funding.

To Member States:

- Ensure that resources from the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), React-EU, and ESIF complement and do not replace national, regional and local funds for the funding of ordinary service provision and social protection schemes. Make also a clear distinction between the programming of ESIF and NRRPs, while developing synergies and links.
- Bring EU funding closer to the needs of social services. Managing authorities should cooperate more closely with the authorities responsible for planning social services to ensure that calls for proposals reflect better actual needs and target effective social services programmes.
- Develop pilot projects to implement the complementary use of ESF+ and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) to facilitate the green and digital transitions in social services.

8. RECRUITMENT, RETENTION, TRAINING, AND UPSKILLING OF STAFF

Whilst the demand for social services is increasing, recruitment and retention of qualified staff remains a big challenge. Reasons for workforce shortages range from the low attractiveness of the sector, precarious working conditions to lack of clearly defined career paths and opportunities for growth.

To the European Commission:

- Ensure that investments in skills development and upskilling, e.g. in digital and green transitions, foreseen in the different EU funding programmes like RRF and ESF+, address social care and social services.
- Issue Country Specific Recommendations to those countries where the working conditions of the care and social services workforce need to be substantially improved.
- Promote the harmonisation of social services workforce qualifications across the EU to address recruitment gaps.

To national, local and regional authorities:

- Facilitate social dialogue in the sector, by ensuring the participation of representatives from the public, private for profit and non-profit sectors, to develop agreements with the aim of improving working conditions.
- Invest in programmes that help to regularise the situation of carers working at households' premises in an informal way.
- Put in place national social services workforce strategies addressing the sector's attractiveness, retention, training, development and resources, as well as informal carers support.

9. DIGITALISATION OF SOCIAL SERVICES

The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated the use of digital tools in social services. However, while some sectors could easily move online, social services are by nature person-centred and the implementation of digital services has varied between types of services and countries. While processes in social services can easily be digitalised, the challenge of data protection remains an issue of concern.

Also, with digitalisation there is a growing risk of digital divide for vulnerable populations and people at risk of exclusion.

To the European Commission:

- Review the EU's Digital Education Action Plan and the programming of the new EU funding programmes to tackle the digital divide and increase skills and familiarity with digital technologies, both for the social services workforce and the populations they work with.
- In the programming of ESIF and NextGenerationEU, ensure that Member States allocate adequate resources to support the digital transition of social services. This includes the modernisation of infrastructure; the digitalisation of platforms and processes, tools supporting decision-making, and assisted living technologies; systems interoperability across departments, levels of government and geographical areas; the re-design of service provision in a digital way; training of staff and upskilling of low-skilled staff to enable them to work in a new environment.

To Member States:

- Support populations affected by the digital divide and ensure that they enjoy equal access to social services, through specific measures under the National Recovery and Resilience Plans, as well as in the programming of ESIF, and other EU and national funding instruments.
- Appoint a specific body at national level to address digitalisation of social services, covering all aspects, especially issues related to data protection, support for the workforce and people using social services.

The **European Social Network** brings together 170 organisations in 34 countries, representing more than 1 million senior social services professionals across Europe and beyond. Their mission is to advance the exchange of knowledge in public social services in partnership with health, education, housing, employment and social inclusion to benefit people and communities through improved policy and practice.

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Eurodiaconia is a network of churches and Christian organizations that provide social and health care services and advocate for social justice. Together we work for just and transformative social change across Europe, leaving no-one behind. Driven by our Christian faith, our vision is of a Europe where each person is valued for their inherent God-given worth and dignity and where our societies guarantee social justice for all people, including the most vulnerable and marginalized

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Funded by the European Commission under the ESF+ programme 2022 - 2025
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