

Stronger Social Services

A Better Europe



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About the European Social Network

The European Social Network (ESN) represents the voice of public social services as employers, managers, funders, planners, providers, and inspectors of social services in Europe. ESN inspires Social Services Leaders to Improve the Lives of People in the Community through the development and exchange of knowledge to improve policy and practice in public social services, including all support and community-based services fighting poverty, promoting social inclusion and autonomy, child protection, protection of people with disabilities, care and support for older people, homeless people, and people and families in disadvantaged socio-economic situations.

About this Briefing

Ahead of the 2024 elections to the European Parliament (EP), the European Social Network (ESN) publishes this briefing with proposals for policy initiatives on social inclusion and social services to future Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and lead candidates for the European Commission Presidency. The briefing, which is based on an analysis of the answers to a questionnaire submitted to ESN member organisations, proposes European political parties three key actions they can include in their programmes to strengthen social inclusion related to social services financing, quality and the workforce.

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Introduction

The European Social Network (ESN) brings together the organisations responsible for planning, designing, financing, and managing public social services in Europe. Through our programme of knowledge building and exchange, we inspire Social Services Leaders to improve the lives of people in the community.

Our members, more than 180 social services departments in public authorities in 34 countries, support people in need to ensure they are supported to be fully included in their communities. Their ability to provide adequate and sustainable social services is impacted by the many pressing social challenges that we face in Europe today, whether the increase in poverty and social exclusion, the migration impact of the war in Ukraine, the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, or the rise in service demand as a result of Europe's ageing population.

The introduction of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the accompanying initiatives to implement its principles, and increased investment, such as the European Social Fund Plus, notably the allocation of at least 25% of the European Social Fund Plus for social inclusion, are some of the ways the European Union has tried to respond to these challenges. Furthermore, the response to the Covid-19 crisis saw significant investment in measures to help EU Member States rebuild and increase their resilience, which in turn helped to cushion the worst of the crisis and ensured people kept receiving the care and support they needed.

Social services are pivotal in upholding the social inclusion and protection principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights but are contingent on factors like the right type of investment, a quality framework and model of care based on the community and investing in the workforce.

The European Parliament's role has long been mostly consultative and supervisory, but it has always been active in the development of EU action in the field of social policy. For instance, the Parliament played a significant role in setting up social targets and their implementation in the framework of the Europe 2020 strategy, incorporating social goals into the European Semester, calling for the European Child Guarantee, a European Care Deal leading to the EU Care Strategy, or the implementation of the action plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights. The European Parliament has also its say on the distribution and thematic allocation of EU funds such as the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+).

Therefore, the European Parliament is an important agenda setter putting forward social inclusion proposals which are relevant for social services and monitoring their implementation. Ahead of the 6-9 June European elections, future MEPs can play a crucial role in strengthening social services to continue building up social inclusion and promoting more cohesive communities across countries. With the proposals put forward by our members, we wish to guide future MEPs to ensure the role of local public social services in promoting social inclusion in Europe is acknowledged and reflected in future European policies and initiatives.

Views from Public Social Services on the ground

The briefing is based on the answers to a questionnaire that we shared with ESN member organisations at the end of 2023. We asked our members which issues they think future MEPs should prioritise in next Parliament.

We received 36 replies from 16 European countries covering Western, Northern, Southern, Central and Eastern Europe: France, Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, Czech Republic, Malta, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, Austria, Denmark, Romania, and Sweden.

Respondents chose four top priorities:

- Addressing challenges related to Social Services Financing was the top priority for 72% of the respondents.
- Quality assurance in social services was equally placed as a top priority by 72% of respondents.
- 64% of respondents highlighted the need to change the model of care towards a more Person-centred and Community-based one.
- The need to address Social Services Workforce challenges was third with 61%.

1. Social Services Financing

Strong and well-resourced social services are fundamental to ensure the success of social inclusion policies. Sustainable social services funding was highlighted as the main concern by most respondents. National governments need to ensure that regional and local social services, who have the statutory duty of providing access to social care and support, have funding that is commensurate with their responsibilities. European funds, such as Next Generation EU have been playing an instrumental role in supporting social services digital transformation. The European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) contributes to funding social services, particularly programmes that are innovative or complement local ones, for instance to provide integrated support for children and families or more personalised and community-based services.

However, ESN members also highlighted how European funds were not always designed to cover the wide range of social services they manage. “The European Social Fund is still primarily directed at employment focused initiatives”, highlighted Mireia Llorens from the Department of Social Rights at the Regional Government of Catalonia, Spain. Adela Setet of Romania’s Social Work Training and Assessment Centre (CFCECAS) emphasised the importance of allocating more financing to social services in communities to foster social services that are locally based and developed.



“The European Social Fund is still primarily directed at employment focused initiatives.”

Mireia Llorens, Department of Social Rights
at the Regional Government of Catalonia, Spain



Other members highlighted the need to look for alternative ways of distributing financing responsibilities between the national government, municipalities, social insurance and people using services themselves, whilst others underlined the need to put in place innovative approaches to reduce bureaucracy in accessing and reporting EU funding. All members stressed the importance of addressing sustainable financing of public social services to support their strategic role in ensuring social inclusion.

2. Social Services Quality

Quality social services are key in improving the quality of life of the persons who use them. “Securing adequate financing is crucial in guaranteeing social services quality”, said Ana Cekiera from the Regional Government of Silesia in Poland. Along similar lines, Renzo de Gabriele, from Active Ageing and Community Care in Malta, proposed the development of a European framework to measure the quality of social services.



“Securing adequate financing is crucial in guaranteeing social services quality.”

Ana Cekiera, Regional Government
of Silesia, Poland



The right to quality in several services like childcare or long-term care is acknowledged by the European Pillar of Social Rights. With the aim of improving quality in social services across Europe, the European Social Protection Committee issued as voluntary framework in 2010, but it has only had a limited impact on EU member states’ quality assurance policies. Therefore, we need a review of the existing framework, analysing why it has not yet had the intended impact and making a proposal for the European Social Services Quality Framework to be revamped.

3. Integrated, Person-centred, Community-based model of Care

The transition from institutional to community and home-based care is essential for social services to respond better to people's needs. It empowers people in care to participate in society and to take control of their own life.

Graham Owen from the Association of Social Services Directors in Sweden stressed the need to present community care as a forward-thinking approach, emphasising its role as a social investment and advocating for sustained coordination of social services with health services, schools, and community activities.

Exchange of good practice to support the transition to a new model of care was underscored by Koen Geirnaert from the Public Centre for Social Welfare (OCMW) in Ghent, Belgium, to further strengthen and promote the model. Many members proposed a European community of practice on this theme.

4. Strengthening the Social Services Workforce

ESN members anticipate that whilst demand for social services support will rise, the number of social services professionals available to meet this demand will not.

The shortage of applicants makes it difficult to fill in positions in social services. The lack of applicants is due to the negative image of the profession, which has often been undervalued, and sometimes badly paid, while jobs are physically and mentally demanding.

Emiliana Vicente Gonzalez, President of the General Council of Social Work in Spain, emphasised the critical importance of improving working conditions, enhancing professional recognition, and investing in a skilled, committed and well-managed workforce to deliver high quality social services.



“Improving working conditions, enhancing professional recognition, and investing in a skilled, committed and well-managed workforce is essential to deliver high quality social services.”

Emiliana Vicente Gonzalez, President of the
General Council of Social Work, Spain



EU Priority Actions to Strengthen Social Services

We also asked our members their views on the most relevant initiatives the EU should launch to support the work of social services.

Their answers reflect their views on the thematic priorities outlined above. Therefore, the European Social Network and its members representing public social services in Europe request that European political parties and MEPs ensure the EU takes the following measures to strengthen social services and promote social inclusion across Europe.

⇒ Promote Social Services Financial Sustainability

Encourage an assessment of social services sustainable financing in the framework of the European Semester of policy coordination between the EU and national governments.

⇒ Revamp the European Social Services Quality Framework

Propose the EU undertakes a review of the 2010 European Voluntary Quality Framework in Social Services and promotes a new Framework to ensure its principles, standards and indicators are up to date with current best practice and revolve around improving the life outcomes of people using social services.

⇒ Incentivise a Person-centred Community-Based model of Care

Call for a European Community Care initiative, which ensures that EU funds are not used for institutional care and focus instead on community-based programmes, and promotes a 'care guarantee for all' to help people who may be at a disadvantaged situation access the care or support they need.

⇒ Launch a European Social Services Workforce Strategy

Advocate for a European Social Services Workforce Strategy that addresses growing demand for professionals, recruitment and retention innovative approaches, mutual recognition of qualifications, and continuing professional development.

European Social Network

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

info@esn-eu.org
esn-eu.org

 @ESNsocial

  European Social Network