
The European Social Network's (ESN) response to the European Commission's Public Consultation on the EU Anti- Poverty Strategy.



Co-funded by
the European Union

European Social Network
Avenue des Arts 3-4-5, 8th Floor, 1210 Brussels, Belgium
Tel: +32 2 511 10 93 · info@esn-eu.org · www.esn-eu.org
VAT Reg. No. BE 0691.597.627

Background

The European Social Network (ESN) represents the voice of public social services as employers, managers, funders, planners, deliverers, 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. This includes 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, as well as people and families in disadvantaged socioeconomic situations.

ESN welcomes the European Commission's commitment and progress towards preparing the first-ever European anti-poverty strategy. This Position Paper presents ESN's proposals for the strategy, which the European Commission is expected to adopt in 2026. Within the paper, ESN highlights a set of priority recommendations that it considers particularly important for the successful implementation of the strategy.

1. Understanding Poverty

Poverty is **multidimensional** and involves not only lack of income but also exclusion from health, education, housing, and community participation.

There are many **root causes**: unemployment, inequality, discrimination, as well as weak social protection.

Therefore, effective anti-poverty strategies require an integrated public authority's response with its key objective to ensure people's social inclusion.

2. Mission of Public Social Services

The main mission of social services is to **promote social inclusion** by ensuring that everyone, especially people experiencing poverty, discrimination, or social exclusion, are supported to participate fully in economic, social, and community life.

This mission is reflected in international and national policy frameworks, such as the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#), which emphasises access to quality social services as a foundation for inclusion and equal opportunities.

Evidence shows that **integrated social services**—combining income support, employment support, housing, health and social care—help reduce long-term poverty and exclusion.

For example, [OECD](#) and [European Social Network](#) studies highlight that areas with stronger social services have lower rates of poverty and social marginalisation, demonstrating their central role in building inclusive societies.

3. Role of Public Social Services

Prevention: Early intervention along the life cycle for people in difficult socio-economic situations and life circumstances to stop poverty cycles.

Examples of prevention programmes include child protection, support for families, education support for children, integrated income, employment and services support for people furthest from the labour market, social care for adults with long-term care needs.

Protection: Providing safety nets

Examples of safety nets include social support -to prevent children being separated from families, housing support -to prevent evictions, income support -for families e.g. to stop poverty posing a threat on parenting.

Empowerment: Supporting individuals and families to become self-reliant

Examples of programmes supporting empowerment include skills training and employment support -for those furthest from labour market, social inclusion through personal assistants, technology improvement at home, or day centres for people with long-term needs.

Coordination: Linking services across sectors — health, employment, education

Coordination may take various forms, for example, cooperation protocols between services, sectors and professionals; digital case management systems with different access layers for professionals and users.

4. Proposals for policy recommendations in the strategy

Social Services have key functions that should be acknowledged in the European anti-poverty strategy, including:

- **Access and Outreach:** Ensuring everyone can reach essential and basic services.
- **Case Management:** Tailoring support to individual needs.

- **Community Development:** Strengthening local networks and civic participation.
- **Advocacy:** Promoting social justice and influencing policy.

Therefore, our proposed recommendations for the strategy cover two main areas:

- Cross-cutting policy proposals from an organisational perspective.
- Thematic policy proposals from a person-centred perspective.

Cross-cutting proposals

1. **Adopt a multidimensional approach to poverty**
2. **Introduce a social services quality framework**
3. **Ensure a person-centred approach and involvement of people with lived experience**
4. **Propose specific investments in the social services workforce**

1. **Adopt a multidimensional approach to poverty**

The strategy should adopt a multifaceted approach that goes beyond income and material deprivation and reflects on the **multidimensional nature of poverty**. Within this context, ESN advocates to frame this approach as addressing '**poverty of opportunities**'.

With poverty of opportunities, we refer to a situation where individual people or groups of people lack access to the resources, services, and conditions necessary to improve their quality of life and achieve their potential. This form of poverty goes beyond material deprivation—it encompasses limited access to education, healthcare, employment, social participation, and other essential opportunities that enable social and economic inclusion.

At the European Social Network (ESN), we have strongly reflected poverty of opportunities in our work. While poverty has a profound effect on some (but not all) aspects of social exclusion, there are other important factors that may cause social exclusion and need addressing to promote social inclusion. For example, age, disability, ethnicity, gender and employment status.

We have consistently emphasised the importance of tackling social exclusion and inequality by promoting access to **quality social services**, inclusive education, and employment opportunities. ESN's policies and projects highlight the importance of empowering people—particularly vulnerable populations such as people with disabilities, children, and older people—by ensuring equal access to opportunities as a

key condition for social inclusion, cohesion and wellbeing across Europe. In light of the above, the Commission could instead rename its initiative as the **European strategy for social inclusion**.

2. Introduce a social services quality framework

Good coverage of social services across EU member states is a key condition for people to access the support they need. ESN's [Social Services Index](#) is a tool that can help measure progress in implementing the strategy and offers an example of good practice for data collection and monitoring, as underlined in the [European Parliament's 2025 EU Semester Report](#).

Yet it is not enough to simply have social services in place, as evidence shows that the quality of those services—measured amongst others through accessibility, staff capacity, and person-centred approaches—directly determines their effectiveness in reducing poverty and improving people's wellbeing. The Council of the European Union has recognised that activating and enabling social services play a vital role in lifting the most vulnerable people out of poverty and social exclusion ([Council of the European Union, 2020](#)).

In light of this, ESN has put forward a proposal for a revamped [European Framework for Quality in Social Services](#) which considers trends and organisational developments within the social services sector to ensure it is relevant to the sector and includes proposals for its implementation. ESN encourages the European Commission to use the initiatives related to the anti-poverty strategy to use this framework to ensure access to quality social services across the EU ([ESN, 2025](#)).

To provide context, fifteen years after its introduction, the impact of the 2010 EU Voluntary Framework on Quality in Social Services has been limited. Only three countries, Bulgaria, Estonia, and Romania, refer to the framework in their legislation. Several EU Member States do not deem it relevant to their national quality policies. Regional and local agencies, which are usually the competent authority for social services quality assurance, possess little or no knowledge about the European Framework. This is understandable since regular updates to the framework are essential to maintain its relevance, effectiveness, and alignment with evolving priorities, such as poverty reduction and sectoral standards.

ESN's proposed **European Framework on Quality in Social Services** includes standards of quality in social services, which are based on six key principles, namely: **Human rights-based; Person-centred; Outcomes-oriented; Safe; Community-based; Well-managed**.

The framework, co-produced with ESN's Quality Working Group between 2022 and 2025, is structured using '**I-Statements**' and '**We-Statements**'. 'I-Statements' are the

social services outcomes a person should expect, formulated in a person-centred and outcome-based manner. In Ireland, 'I-Statements' have been developed for the Overarching National Standards for the Care and Support of Children Using Health and Social Care Services. By providing a common framework for all health and social care services working with children, the overarching standards aim to promote clarity, consistency, and continuity within and between services.

'We-Statements' are the outcomes service providers should aspire to, formulated in an outcomes-based manner. Each 'I-Statement' is matched by a 'We-Statement' and together they form a quality standard. The 'We-Statements' are based on the ones developed as part of the English Single Assessment Framework. They are written from a provider's perspective to help them understand what is expected of them.

Developing a Social Services Quality Framework in the anti-poverty strategy would enhance accountability among public authorities and service providers, ensuring the delivery of high-quality, person-centred social care and social inclusion services across Europe, hence implementing key principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

3. Ensure a person-centred approach and involvement of people with lived experience

Public social services provide support primarily for vulnerable people based on an assessment of their social needs: children at risk of harm or neglect, long-term unemployed, people with disabilities, older people with long-term support needs, young people, migrants and refugees, homeless people, people with mental illness or single parents, amongst others.

There is a '**no one-size-fits-all**' solution to combating and preventing poverty. In addition to guaranteeing the basics such as secure living space, allowances for food and clothing, access to work and schooling, there is a need for social services providers to offer personalised, long-term and sustained support underpinned by common values of empowerment, justice, equality, and the establishment of mutual trust ([ESN, 2023](#)).

The strategy should acknowledge that participation of people with lived experience must extend beyond informing them of policy decisions or consulting them through focus groups or online feedback mechanisms. **Meaningful participation** requires their **active involvement** throughout the policy process, ensuring their input directly influences the programmes that are being designed for them or the services they access.

Besides this acknowledgement, the strategy should encourage EU, national and local initiatives to involve people with lived experience and provide examples of how to do it guiding decision-makers and professionals to make it happen.

4. Propose specific investment in the social services workforce

An effective anti-poverty strategy should prioritise strengthening the social services workforce as a key driver of inclusive and sustainable change. As previously highlighted by ESN ([ESN, 2017](#)), this can take the form of a working group led by DG Employment with national government representatives and the participation of social services from the public and non-public sectors to discuss the **mutual recognition** of social work qualifications; registration, qualifications and accreditation of social care workers; ways of putting in place projections of workforce demand and supply; training particularly on digital delivery; and campaigns to ensuring adequate staffing levels by using all available instruments including intra-EU migration and European and national awareness campaigns. Moreover, it should promote **interdisciplinary collaboration** and empower frontline workers to participate in policy design and evaluation, recognising their lived experience, professional judgement and community insight.

The strategy should also invest in continuous professional development by linking up with EU funding instruments to equip workers with the skills to address complex and evolving needs—such as those related to disability, mental health, housing insecurity, and social inclusion. By valuing, resourcing, and supporting the social services workforce, an anti-poverty strategy can enhance service quality, improve access to support, and foster long-term social resilience.

Person-centred proposals

1. Child-centred support
2. Integrated person-centred support for persons in homelessness situations
3. Person-centred integrated support for people furthest from the labour market
4. A care guarantee for all, particularly for people with disabilities and older people with long-term needs.

1. Child-centred support

The [Child Guarantee](#) is a key step forward in fighting child poverty, but ESN calls for it to have a stronger focus on the most vulnerable children, such as those in the child protection system. The European Parliament's 2023 report on [reducing inequalities in times of crisis for children and their families](#), states that an estimated 345,000 children in the EU still live in institutions. This is a key point to address as

institutionalised care for children has a negative impact on their future development opportunities, health and social wellbeing ([European Parliament, 2023](#)).

Child poverty is an enduring problem that should be a matter of priority for policymakers. In the European Union, nearly one in four children faces the risk of poverty or social exclusion ([Eurostat, 2021](#)). At the same time, children in poverty are exposed to a higher risk of violence and abuse and end up in the protection of the state.

ESN members recognise the multi-dimensional nature of child poverty and ESN supports the three-pillar approach presented in the European Commission recommendation on “[Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage](#)”: access to adequate resources; access to quality services & opportunities; and children’s participation.

It is important to help parents or other adults involved in a child's upbringing, given the ‘**cycle of deprivation**’, whereby children ‘inherit’ poverty and disadvantage from their parents. In many cases, improving children’s lives also means improving parents’ lives. ESN also emphasises the links between different key services, the importance of multi-agency work between services working with children, the mutual interdependence of benefits, family policies and services, and the participation of children in decisions affecting their lives.

In order to advance the eradication of child poverty and the successful implementation of the European Child Guarantee, ESN encourages the anti-poverty strategy to promote investment in the most vulnerable children who are often under child protection through a **comprehensive and collaborative partnership approach** with public social services authorities, which are central in improving the lives of children and families at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

2. Integrated person-centred support for people in homelessness situations

The anti-poverty strategy should emphasise that **integrated, person-centred support** for homeless people is essential to addressing the complex and interconnected causes of homelessness. It should highlight the need for **coordinated services** that combine housing support with access to healthcare, mental health care, substance use treatment, employment opportunities, and social inclusion programmes.

The strategy should stress that support must be tailored to each individual’s unique circumstances, strengths, and aspirations—delivered through collaboration between public social services, and community and third sector organisations. This holistic approach ensures that people are not only housed but also empowered to rebuild

stability, autonomy, and dignity in their lives. The strategy should promote the identification and financing of good practice through EU funding.

3. Person-centred integrated support for people furthest from the labour market

It is crucial to guarantee the social inclusion of people in vulnerable situations furthest from the labour market. This population can benefit significantly from access to good quality social services. Too often ‘**access to quality services**’, recognised as one of three key pillars by the European Commission in its [2008 Active Inclusion Recommendation](#), is the one that has been most disregarded.

Therefore, the strategy should highlight the key role of quality social services to allow people to re-join the labour market and participate in society (by addressing mental health, debt issues, or childcare needs). Combining minimum income, or similar financial benefits schemes, with accompanying social services support in an integrated manner, helps to build an enabling ecosystem that fosters the economic and social inclusion of minimum income beneficiaries ([ESN, 2023](#)).

Active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market can be achieved through **combining income support**, personalised support towards inclusive labour markets and universal access to affordable and quality services.

Yet, the combination of minimum income and social services remains problematic. For example, 54% of those at risk of poverty prior to receiving benefits do not receive any form of financial support, such as minimum income, disability or unemployment benefits ([Eurofound, 2024](#)).

The strategy should shift policy and practice activation focused solely on employment to an ‘[Inclusive activation](#)’ approach, an approach pioneered by the European Social Network that promotes social inclusion. This approach aims to support people furthest from the labour market in a holistic manner, adapted to the individual’s needs through recognising that measures to improve a person’s social wellbeing, health, education and housing related needs are just as important as employment when promoting social inclusion.

In 2024, in the EU, 66.6% of unemployed adults were at risk of poverty or social exclusion ([Eurostat, 2025](#)). Employment is a critical pathway out of poverty, but active inclusion cannot stand alone ([ESN, 2019](#)). Social services can help employment services identify which measures could support the labour market to become more inclusive for people with complex needs through an integrated and combined approach of income support, personalised support to access employment, and quality social services. The EU can play a key role in promoting knowledge exchange and building between national government representatives and develop specific

recommendations in this area through the implementation of the Anti-Poverty strategy ([ESN, 2021](#)).

4. A Care Guarantee for All, particularly for people with disabilities and older people with long-term needs

The European Social Network (ESN) calls for a **care guarantee** to ensure that everyone, regardless of age, ability, or socio-economic status, has access to quality, person-centred, and affordable care and support services. This guarantee is rooted in the belief that **care is a fundamental right** and a prerequisite for social inclusion, dignity, and well-being.

For older people and people with disabilities, a care guarantee is especially relevant because they often face barriers in accessing consistent and tailored social care that allows them to live independently and participate fully in society. By advocating for a care guarantee, ESN seeks to promote equitable access to community-based and long-term care services, reduce inequalities between regions and social groups, and support the sustainability of Europe's social welfare systems.

Ensuring monitoring, implementation and mainstreaming

In its [Europe 2020 strategy](#), the EU adopted five headline targets, including lifting at least 20 million people out of the risk of poverty or social exclusion by 2020. However, the European Commission did not formally assess whether the poverty targets had been met.

As ESN warned in 2021, the target, which mostly measured income inequality, seemed to be largely missed. It is very important that the new anti-poverty strategy leads to action and not just aspiration ([ESN, 2021](#)).

ESN provides the following recommendations to improve governance and help implement and monitor the EU anti-poverty strategy:

- Establish a **dedicated group within the Social Protection Committee** to discuss with national government representatives' national anti-poverty strategies and their alignment with the European one.
- Pay within this group particular attention to **the role of regional and local authorities**, liaising with them regularly to better understand their needs and how they are developing and implementing aligned strategies.
- Developing workshops with representatives from local and regional authorities to discuss **implementation, monitoring** and **evaluation** of the strategy.

- Linking future EU funding to the implementation of the strategy by **earmarking specific funding** for initiatives related to its implementation at regional and national level.
- Ensuring **multi-level governance coordination and communication** with EU funding managing authorities at local, regional and national level to raise awareness amongst them of the importance of developing programmes aligned with the strategy's implementation.
- Commission officials should seize the opportunity that the strategy offers to **strengthen and link it up with other initiatives** including the child guarantee, the new EPSR Action Plan, youth guarantee, the disability strategy, active inclusion, homelessness and housing plan, and the care strategy.

Moving Forward

The European anti-poverty strategy should acknowledge that policy and practice aiming to reduce poverty and social exclusion should promote **equality, social inclusion and cohesion**. The main mission of social services is to promote social inclusion by ensuring that everyone, especially people experiencing poverty, discrimination, or social exclusion, are supported to participate fully in economic, social, and community life.

This mission should be reflected in the future anti-poverty strategy. Yet they cannot do this by themselves but in coordination with employment, housing, education and health to boost the effectiveness and sustainability of social inclusion programmes.

Yet, these programmes need the right workforce supported by the necessary resources and infrastructure to build partnerships with the community to create the right conditions for support.

In short, guided by the '**no one left behind principle**', the future European anti-poverty strategy should:

- ✓ Adopt a **multidimensional approach to poverty** that goes beyond income and material deprivation and reflects on its multidimensional nature through a '**poverty of opportunities**' angle that emphasises equal access to opportunities as a key condition for social inclusion and therefore places the European Commission's initiative as a strategy for social inclusion.
- ✓ Introduce a **new social services quality framework** that gathers principles, standards and ways to implement them to guide services to ensure access to quality social services across the EU.

- ✓ **Reflect the direct needs of people with lived experience** through active promotion and meaningful participation in the design, implementation, and monitoring of the strategy.
- ✓ Strengthen the social services workforce as a key driver of inclusive and sustainable change through a specific EC-national government group to address mutual recognition of qualifications, recognition and accreditation, workforce demand and supply and adequate staffing levels.
- ✓ **Invest in the most vulnerable children** who are often under child protection through a comprehensive and collaborative partnership approach with public authorities with responsibility for child social welfare.
- ✓ **Underline the need for coordinated services** that combine housing support with social inclusion programmes, promote the identification and financing of good practice through EU funding.
- ✓ Promote the social inclusion of people in vulnerable situations furthest from the labour market through an **inclusion activation approach** that provides access to high-quality social services.
- ✓ **Put in place a care guarantee** to ensure that everyone, regardless of age, ability, or socio-economic status, has access to quality, person-centred, and affordable care and support services.