
The public social services view

European Social Network's (ESN)

response to the European
Commission's Public Consultation on
the European Pillar of Social Rights
new Action Plan.

About the European Social Network

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, 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, as well as people and families in disadvantaged socioeconomic situations.

Background

In 2025, ESN sent a questionnaire to its members, to gather input from members and ensure their views are represented in ESN's submission to this open consultation, asking for their views on the impact of the [2021 Action Plan](#), the lessons learnt, and potential areas for improvement where further progress might be needed.

ESN welcomes the commitment and progress of the European Commission towards the preparation of the new Action Plan for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR).

This briefing outlines ESN's recommendations that the EPSR's new Action Plan should include to ensure accessibility, coverage and quality of public social services across Europe. We propose the following recommendations:

1. Monitoring through the European Semester Cycle
2. Link funding to the implementation of the Pillar
3. Support national public authorities to strengthen social services at national level
 - a. Integrated social and employment services (Relevant Principles: 12,13,14)
 - b. Support for children (Relevant principle: 11)
 - c. Invest in the care workforce (Relevant principles: 15,16,17,18)
 - d. Inclusion of people with disabilities (Relevant principle 17)
 - e. Investment in long- term care services (Relevant principle: 18)
 - f. Support for homeless people or at risk of homelessness (Relevant Principle: 19)
4. Moving Forward

1. Monitoring through the European Semester

ESN members agree that effectively measuring progress of the implementation of the new Action Plan is key. Therefore, the European Semester should continue to be

used as a means for ensuring progress in the implementation of the principles contained in the EPSR in European countries.

ESN suggests this could be done in at least two ways:

1. First, by issuing Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) directly linked to programmes implementing the Pillar principles.
2. Second, this should be complemented by a European monitoring mechanism on the fulfilment of the recommendations and therefore implementation of the Pillar principles. This mechanism may take the form of a platform with representatives from stakeholders, including public social services from public authorities and non-public service providers.

Additionally, the [European Parliament's March 2025 resolution](#) on the European Semester for economic policy coordination highlighted the message ESN has been reiterating [in ESN's previous European Semester reports](#). While collecting the data is key for an evidence-based analysis of national social policies in the European Semester, there is currently no regular national collection of data on social services investment and coverage, let alone at European level. This year's resolution went further by acknowledging specifically that "the European Social Network's Social Services Index is an example of how such data collection can contribute to the European Semester analysis".

By naming social services and the Social Services Index explicitly, the European Parliament acknowledges ESN's work and adds democratic weight to calls from the European Social Network and partners who have been long championing this cause. ESN has highlighted disparities in the coverage of social services and difficulties figuring out the type of investment made, and how these need to be addressed through the European Semester as the Parliament's resolution requests.

The European Parliament's call to prioritise access to quality social services using national and EU instruments like the [European Social Fund Plus](#) (ESF+) and promote better data collection to monitor social services coverage and investment are very much aligned with the proposals ESN made in the [cross-country analysis of ESN's 2024 Social Services Index](#). The message from the European Parliament is clear and aligns with ESN's: social services are not secondary -they are strategic. The Parliament is backing that up by embedding social services into the European Semester process, the very mechanism that shapes national policy reform plans and EU funding priorities.

For local policymakers, this is an opportunity. It is a moment to advocate more strongly for targeted funding, to promote social inclusion in national policy plans, and to build partnerships that scale up best practice. In short, the new EPSR Action plan is a chance to make connections with policy and funding to ensure that social investment is at the very heart of EU policy making and funding developments.

2. Link funding to the implementation of the Pillar

According to our members, ensuring effective implementation of the Pillar can be achieved by linking European funding to the fulfilment of its principles. Along these lines, the Commission may look at the possibility of discussing adherence to the Pillar principles for the allocation of EU Structural Funds with national, regional and local management authorities (MAs).

Likewise, direct EU funding calls could be developed with an aim to support the implementation of individual Pillar principles or a combination of them.

In line with this, [2028-2034 Multiannual Financial Framework \(MFF\)](#) programmes should ensure the implementation of the EPSR and be developed with national and regional MAs who are responsible for the development of social inclusion programmes. There should be a focus on ensuring that programmes funded through the ESF+ focus not just on active inclusion but also on community and social inclusion programmes, particularly looking at rural areas that are often left excluded. Likewise, future programmes should ensure that deadlines for implementation and reporting mechanisms are more flexible, to guarantee that the quality of programmes is not negatively impacted.

An ESN member from a Latvian public authority argued:

“On one hand, rigid progress and dates are means to achieve planned results. On the other hand, in practice we see that rigid deadlines are too often met on the expense of quality. This especially relates to projects financed by EU structural funds.”

An ESN member from France said:

“EU funding should go to projects that are not only focused on professional inclusion, but also on social inclusion not specifically focused on employment. Additionally, there should be a specific focus on the inclusion of projects from associations and rural areas, which otherwise are often excluded.”

To achieve this, it is important to involve social services in programming and funding management of programmes that relate to the Pillar principles so that these provisions are effectively met. While EU funds are key for social services development, social services encounter significant challenges in accessing relevant EU funding like the ESF+ due to complex application processes and a lack of understanding of these programmes within national, regional and local MAs. To ensure the effective implementation of the Pillar, application processes to access EU funding must be simplified and made more accessible to smaller organisations.

One member in Germany stated:

“The success of the funding must be monitored specifically and regularly. In addition, the misuse of these measures must be prevented.”

A member in Latvia commented:

“Sustainability of such programmes has always been an issue, and it should be taken into account.”

3. At the National Level: Strengthen social services to support the most vulnerable

1. Recognise the essential role of public social services:

Ensure the inclusion in the new Action Plan of the essential role of public social services in the implementation of the principles contained in the EPSR, particularly Chapter III. Our members agreed that recognition will also contribute to ensuring adequate investment on the one hand and encourage national governments to do their same at national level for those countries that have not done it yet.

2. Invest in public social services to realise the objectives of the new Action Plan:

Public social services play a key role in the implementation of European initiatives related to social protection and inclusion at local level, such as those supporting the implementation of the EPSR principles. To make this a reality, the new Action Plan should include clear references to **public authorities' social services statutory duty of care**.

One member from Spain added:

“The duty of care must include sufficient financial recognition to enable maximum quality, innovation and impact measurement for the development of evidence-based programmes, involving service providers such as non-profit providers”

a. Integrated social and employment services (Relevant Principles: 12,13,14)

The Pillar's new Action Plan should include targeted actions towards efficient and integrated support combining social protection benefits and public social services. ESN members who were asked about integrated social and employment services agreed that these actions should include programmes that link the provision of minimum income to a social inclusion plan that guarantees access to social services.

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 to help them be fully included and contribute to society. Too often, access to social services is disregarded. Access to high-quality social services is important in guaranteeing quality of life for beneficiaries of minimum income. Despite this, the combination of minimum income with social services remains problematic most of the time.

The new Action Plan should pay particular attention to support mechanisms for public social services authorities working with the long-term unemployed and populations facing difficulties in accessing the labour market, such as young people leaving care, people with mental health problems, people with disabilities, migrants, and people from ethnic minorities from disadvantaged socio-economic situations.

While ESN welcomed the recent [Disability Employment package](#) produced by the European Commission as part of the [Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030](#), ESN underlines that the new EPSR Action Plan should lead to the creation of other active inclusion related programmes and packages. This should further enable public social services authorities to support people from other backgrounds and who have other disadvantages to access the open labour market.

These proposals should prioritise partnership-based approaches between employment and social services, working in an integrated manner to support those facing the greatest barriers to accessing the labour market. This recommendation should also be reflected in the upcoming [Anti- Poverty Strategy](#).

A member from Latvia said:

“Partnership- based approaches between employment and social services are difficult to achieve if employment agencies do not work with a holistic approach. We suggest requiring employment agencies to use more case management, be client oriented and adopt a more personal and holistic approach that not only includes employment but also other areas of people’s lives.”

b. Support for children (Relevant principle: 11)

The new Action Plan should recognise that the child's best interests must be a primary consideration when public authorities assess the need to provide children with care and protection. Therefore, the Action Plan should include actions targeted towards the promotion of integrated community-based programmes.

Outlined in ESN’s 2025 publication ‘[Protecting Children: Working in Partnerships across Children’s Services](#)’, ESN recommends the new Action Plan:

- Recognise the essential role of public social services to ensure equal opportunities for all children

- Implement the three pillars of the European Commission's Recommendation 'Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage' through a multiannual strategy
- Ensure access to public social services for the most vulnerable children and their families
- Design national plans with public social services, vulnerable children, and their families
- Invest in public social services to realise the aims and objectives of the ECG
- Ensure monitoring and evaluation of implementation

There is a need for the new Action Plan to actively work with and involve local, regional and national child welfare social services. Despite most services for children being delivered through these authorities, there is a stark lack of involvement and interaction with the European Commission.

ESN's position is in line with the [European Committee of the Regions' 2024 opinion](#) on improving the social inclusion of children by implementing the European Child Guarantee (ECG) at local and regional level. This calls on Member States to partner with all relevant stakeholders in the carrying out of the measures set out in their national action plans, including public authorities in charge of children's services particularly those who are most disadvantaged.

Special attention and targeted actions will be needed for specific groups of children, such as children from a low socio-economic background, children with disabilities or refugee and migrant children, including unaccompanied children. In a context in which the number of children in alternative care has been increasing in the past years, the Pillar's new Action Plan should recognise that all children in need of care (regardless of their status) should grow up in a family environment in accordance with the [European Child Guarantee \(ECG\)](#).

Successful implementation of the European Child Guarantee is also key to the achievement of Principle 11 of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#), which provides for children's right to education and care and to protection against poverty to break the cycle of social exclusion.

A significant number of these services are provided at regional and local levels by public social services who have a pivotal role in protecting children, as highlighted by the European Commission in [its 2024 recommendation on developing and strengthening integrated child protection systems in the best interests of the child](#). In addition to considering the particular needs of different categories of vulnerable children, including those in precarious family situations or placed in alternative care, regional and local social services also have a better understanding of the risks and challenges these children encounter within their specific region and community.

Yet, time and time again, representatives from public social services in regional and local authorities are not included in EU-level discussions concerning the implementation of EU principles and policy proposals for which they're ultimately responsible, despite the European Social Network (ESN) identifying this as a [key reason for inadequate implementation](#). Therefore, the new Action plan should invest in a comprehensive, collaborative partnership approach in particular with sub-national public authorities with responsibility for the design and delivery of child social welfare programmes.

c. Invest in the care workforce (Relevant principles: 15,16,17,18)

Programmes providing entry level training, supporting recruitment and retention and career progression would help address the shortage in the care workforce, which is an issue across Europe. According to our members, if these are aimed at those living in areas of disadvantage and younger people, it could also support the work of the EU in combating poverty and investment in local communities promoting the care economy.

The Pillar's new Action Plan should work with national governments on **a social care and social services workforce strategy** that includes adequate support and entry-level programmes and training, career progression, appropriate remuneration and specific positive actions targeted towards people who have been working in informal care as well as men.

ESN [has previously underlined](#) the importance of a social services workforce strategy to ensure implementation of the pillar and develop a more resilient and supportive workforce across Europe, ensuring that social services can meet the growing demands and challenges of the future.

A member in Latvia said:

"Experience shows that the work environment is an important factor for retaining and attracting staff, along with a modern set up with functional and adequate premises (e.g. family like or more informal environment). Social guarantees (additional health care insurance, extra holiday, partly paid public transport etc) are also important factors."

A member in Slovenia stated:

"Entry level trainings are very important, as well as life- long learning possibilities, and they should be available in social care and social services for the care workforce."

d. Inclusion of people with disabilities (Relevant principle 17)

The Pillar's new Action Plan should include actions targeted at the social inclusion of people with disabilities not just in relation to employment but across all areas of life, with a particular focus on their social inclusion through the development of community-based care and support.

Our members agreed that the new Action Plan should focus on the promotion of joint programmes of income, social services and support in the community; advancing the active participation of people with disabilities in their care and support plans; promoting choice and control through personal budgets and co-created support plans that recognise people supported by care as people with skills and ability.

As part of the EPSR new Action Plan, ESN suggests the European Commission to link the implementation of the Pillar with actions related to the EU strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030, and particularly **a community-based care strategy with a focus on promoting independent living**.

e. Investment in long- term care services (Relevant principle: 18)

The new Action Plan should continue targeting programmes promoting accessibility, affordability, coverage, and quality of long-term care further progressing towards a community and home-based model of care. It should include work with national governments to incentivise the creation of a definition of 'quality long-term care' in legislation and policy, especially in those countries that are immersed in the development of long-term care strategies.

Implementation should focus on investment promoting cooperation between community health and social services in the integrated delivery of community care for older adults with complex needs. These efforts should include experimenting and documenting different care models combining care and accommodation together with a wider range of services in local care ecosystems, fundamental for accessible high-quality long-term care. Quality assurance is a key aspect of ensuring good quality care that transcends LTC to ensure that social services respond to the needs of people who use them. Therefore, there is a need to have in place a **social services quality framework** that gathers principles, standards and ways to implement them to guide services to ensure they are of good quality.

Social services at national, regional, and local levels are at the forefront of responding to the growing long-term care (LTC) needs of ageing populations. In this process, social services are confronted with four key challenges: changing the care model, building and developing the workforce, sustaining finances, and ensuring quality.

Therefore, having in place the appropriate framework to ensure the quality of those services is key to ensure they are effective in meeting people's needs.

The EPSR promotes people's right to be cared for in the community by stating that: "everyone has the right to (...) long-term care services, particularly home care and community-based services". Most people wish to stay in their own homes and communities, despite increasing frailty and care needs related to ageing, so public authorities must consider this when planning their LTC services.

The [European Care Strategy](#), including its [Council Recommendation](#) on access to affordable high-quality long-term care, is a major EU initiative to build on. [ESN's 2024 Social Services Index](#) offers evidence that there is plenty of space for improvement, including in long-term care coverage. The collected data from the Index show that several countries still heavily rely on residential and informal care, and that investment is required to develop community-based care services across Europe.

For this to happen, local and regional social services in public authorities should be key partners of any future initiative under the European Care strategy, since they have a key responsibility in managing these services.

A member in Spain suggested:

"The Recommendation should be part of a deinstitutionalisation strategy that delays and reduces institutionalisation, taking advantage of the community's potential to maintain ageing in place."

f. Support for homeless people or at risk of homelessness (Relevant Principle: 19)

In countries where data is collected, local authorities have been reporting an increase in homelessness year on year. Therefore, in the new Action plan the European Commission should address the definition and collection of data on homeless people and people at risk of homelessness. ESN members agree this process should be accompanied by a reflection on a comprehensive policy and support framework to address homelessness.

Homelessness is one of the most pressing social challenges in Europe today. Families, women, young people, migrants, and individuals in precarious employment now find themselves increasingly vulnerable. Despite progress in adopting rights-based and housing-led approaches, gaps in systematic monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks hinder the effectiveness of homelessness services.

The European Union has underscored the importance of combating homelessness, enshrining this commitment in the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) and the [European Platform on Combating Homelessness](#). The increasing prevalence of

homelessness, exacerbated by economic pressures and the housing crisis, demands innovative and collaborative responses. Effective solutions must bridge gaps in housing and welfare systems, ensuring a comprehensive approach that integrates housing-first strategies with robust data-driven methodologies.

National and local governments are attempting to solve homelessness and housing exclusion, and in some cities, they have managed to find ways to do so. In the EU, the European Commission has launched a platform to monitor the situation. What we know from evidence is that preventing and ending homelessness requires an integrated strategy. Therefore, the new Action Plan must ensure strengthened engagement and participation between national, regional and local authorities.

More specifically, the Commission should encourage national governments to include a **permanent section reporting on care and support programmes to address homelessness in their public housing plans.**

The new Action Plan should also **promote joint programmes combining housing, care and support** for people in vulnerable situations in need of housing, such as marginalised adults and young people, students, single-parent households, people with disabilities and mental health problems, asylum seekers and people from ethnic minorities. This recommendation must also be reflected in the upcoming [Affordable Housing Plan](#).

A member from Spain stated:

“It is essential that homelessness programmes include early detection and the immediate activation of comprehensive resources (one-stop-shop) that include administrative status, language, training, employment, housing, community participation and health.”

4. Moving Forward

In short, the new Action Plan on the EPSR should:

- Guarantee home or community-based care through a **Care Guarantee**, acknowledging that anyone could need care at any stage of their life and therefore supporting public social services in the provision of care across the life cycle.
- Include a social services **workforce strategy** as part of the Pillar action plan to develop a more resilient and supportive workforce across Europe, ensuring that social services can meet the growing demands and challenges of the future.
- Guarantee **the social inclusion** of people in vulnerable situations furthest from the labour market through access to high-quality social services.
- Ensure that programmes funded through the ESF+ focus not just on **active inclusion** but also on community and social inclusion programmes, particularly looking at rural areas that are often left excluded.

- Create a **social services quality framework** that gathers principles, standards and ways to implement them to guide services to ensure they are of good quality to meet people's needs.
- Ensure the ECG invests 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.
- Develop further housing and social services support through encouraging national governments to include a **permanent section reporting on care and support programmes for people in homelessness in their public housing plans**.