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## **The Future EU Multiannual Financial Framework needs to remain a key instrument for the development of community-based social services**

**The European Social Network's (ESN)** response to the European Commission Consultation on:

**'EU's next long-term budget (MFF) – implementing EU funding with Member States and regions'**

## About the European Social Network

The European Social Network (ESN) is the European Network for Public Social Services, which currently brings together 185 member organisations from 33 countries. Our members represent public social services authorities at national, regional, and local levels as well as organisations with responsibility for regulation, inspection and applied research. ESN has the mandate to represent the perspectives of our membership in EU processes and strategies.

## EU Funds are central to the development of social services

ESN members manage and receive EU funds for employment and social inclusion. A recent internal questionnaire revealed that 72% of ESN members consider access to EU funding crucial. Our members use indirect EU funding programmes such as INTERREG, ERDF, and ESF+, which they may either manage themselves when they are allocated through the distribution of funds at the regional level or for which they apply through the responsible agency at the national level. They also work with direct EU funding, e.g. through CERV, ERASMUS+ and EaSI, to promote and test innovative social services solutions, engage in international knowledge, capacity building, and best practice exchange, and ensure and improve people's access to social care and support.

ESN members highlighted that they very much appreciate the learning and knowledge exchange opportunities funded through EU programmes such as the Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI). These programmes allow them to test new ideas and launch pilots.

In addition, many of our members use EU support to develop programmes for the most vulnerable people, such as the ESF+ Programme for Food and Basic Material Support (FEAD), which directly supports people who are most deprived. Many of our members have more recently benefited from post-COVID EU funds, such as the Recovery and Resilience Facility, to help them drive forward social policy reforms piloting new solutions and transforming and modernising social care systems towards a more community-based and integrated model. These funding programmes have been crucial resources contributing to the development of more modern social services.

Therefore, the EU's future Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) should continue to include and specifically acknowledge **the importance of budgets for social services support programmes**. EaSI, for instance, is a very valuable programme that fosters peer learning, capacity building, innovation, and best practice exchange among social services. Therefore, EaSI should be made more widely available with a clear focus on public authorities' lead and a requirement for cooperation with other authorities and organisations, such as the third sector.

Programmes like ERASMUS+ should continue to run with a focus on supporting capacity building and training for the social services workforce and specifically for managers with the aim of promoting the development of innovative solutions for the social inclusion of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

The FEAD is a key instrument in the delivery of support and should be funded with a requirement to link it to wider social inclusion programmes funded under the ESF, thereby making a connection between several EU funding streams.

ESN members see investment in the **modernisation and transformation of social services**, particularly through digitalisation, as a key pillar of the next EU MFF. Future EU funds should help mobilise the potential of technological, digital, and artificial intelligence tools for the development and improvement of social services. EU funds should also help develop preventative social programmes for early intervention and support. Investments in defence and economic competitiveness should not be increased at the expense of social funds and programmes. Instead, they should complement each other; in particular, investments in the social services and social care workforce are key to addressing the demographic challenge. As we speak of emergency and resilience, the next MMF should include specific capacity-building investments in frontline public social services to better address emergency situations, for instance, those related to public health crises or natural catastrophes and extreme weather events, which are nowadays more frequent due to climate change.

EU investments in social services should specifically focus on new models of care and support that put the person at the centre proposing both innovation through the EaSI as well as structural reforms through the ESF+. This involves putting in place better ways to combine funds including integrating and reporting mechanisms, which otherwise would put considerable burdens on the local actors who are responsible for implementation.

### **Tackling societal challenges and supporting the most vulnerable**

The future MFF should continue to support the implementation of key European policies; for example, it should help all social services in fulfilling their mission of providing care and support for people in need in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights. The EU has a key responsibility to provide funding for programmes that help tackle major social challenges, such as demographic ageing and transition and its impact across Europe, which is relevant for both care providers and care recipients. The future EU Budget should continue funding programmes such as ESF+ and FEAD that are supporting vulnerable groups, such as children, older people, people with disabilities, and people in situations of social exclusion. As highlighted by the European Commission, social services are the cornerstone of EU welfare states. Hence, it is key that EU funds specifically focus on social services to help promote social inclusion and combat poverty.

Future EU social funds should make social inclusion a key priority very closely related to labour market inclusion, but with a clear distinctive focus. It is key that EU funding programmes are aligned with EU policies. Therefore, these policies should be accompanied by the right funding, including the EU Child Guarantee, the Care Strategy, the FEAD programme and the Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) strand in ESF+.

### **Promoting a community- based model of care and support**

ESN members are dedicated to the transition to a community-based social care model. The future MFF should fund programmes that are person-centred, and this can only happen in the community. Such programmes should ensure that children in alternative care grow up in a family-like environment and adults with care needs can live in their own homes for as long as possible, e.g. through overarching home care programmes supported by technology. ESN calls for the future MFF to ensure that EU funds do not invest in institutional care and are specifically focused on the promotion of community-based social services, enabling the transition from institutional to family-based and community-based care and promoting a Care Guarantee for all funded by the ESF+. This would help facilitate the transition from institutional care to a more inclusive, equitable and sustainable community care model that is more responsive to people's needs.

### **Involving social services in programming and funding management**

While EU funds are key for social services development, social services encounter significant challenges in accessing EU funding, particularly the ESF+, due to complex application processes and a lack of understanding of these programmes within managing authorities (MAs). MAs may sometimes overlook the need for social services and prioritise labour market integration over social inclusion programmes, making it difficult for these services to secure funding. Our members have expressed that EU funding programmes need to be co-developed with social services departments in public authorities at the national, regional and local levels to ensure they are properly targeted. Their allocation and programming should be based on principles like subsidiarity, shared management, and decentralisation, including participation in decision-making.

### **Improving access to EU funds for social services**

ESN members have reported that application procedures and project management require specific capacities and skills. In addition, ESN members expressed that the administrative burden of applying for and managing EU projects can be high, which sometimes discourages them from applying and can lead to them opting for national funding instead. The EU should invest in capacity building in social services for managing and implementing EU funds whilst also

improving links between programmes and reporting procedures, as suggested above.

In short, the next long-term financial framework should:

- **Make proposals for better cooperation between authorities.** This means requiring managing authorities to better coordinate with the authorities responsible for programmes, e.g. social services departments, to improve decision-making in allocation and programming so funds are properly allocated for social inclusion programmes led by social services.
- **Promote the partnership principle to ensure** cooperation between public authorities and social services in social inclusion programmes, ensuring these programmes are well aligned to local and regional needs.
- **Secure a European Social Fund+ with adequate funding to deliver on social inclusion policy commitments.** The ESF+ should include programmes, particularly in areas of capacity-building for managers and professionals, good practice exchange, innovation for new programmes, and delivery of those support programmes to improve social inclusion and eventually make them structural. Here, the combination of innovation and structural funds in all phases - design, delivery, evaluation and reporting - is key to make it a success.
- **Promote access to community- and family-based care and support. This means maintaining** the current **enabling conditions** that link eligibility for funding to accessibility, inclusion, and the protection of fundamental and social rights.
- Include a **care guarantee** for all that promotes access to community- and family-based care for people in need.