
European Social Network's (ESN) Official Statement on the Next Multiannual Financial Framework (2028–2034)

Background

In July 2025, the European Commission presented its proposal for the next [Multiannual Financial Framework \(MFF\) for 2028-2034](#). While the proposal pools EU funds under one instrument, providing a unified top-level framework, ESN has [expressed concern](#) over the reduced visibility of social funding and the negative impact increasing centralisation may have on the allocation of funding for social inclusion programmes, with negative consequences on local and regional social services and people who use them.

At a time when Europe needs clear strategic direction and a stronger, more resilient social fabric, strategy without proximity is fragile. Social services play a central role in inclusive growth and development. Therefore, ensuring public social services are adequately funded and supported through the next MFF is critical to achieving the European Pillar of Social Rights ([EPSR](#)) and long-term poverty reduction targets, including Ursula Von Der Leyen's [announced](#) target to eradicate poverty in the EU by 2050.

With the current proposal, the next MFF risks to come to the detriment of these same goals the Commission has set to achieve. The people who use social services, who are also the very same people these proposals claim to protect, may indeed be more damaged than benefited by the current proposal.

The Dilution of the ESF+: A step back for the most vulnerable

To begin with, the European Social Fund Plus ([ESF+](#)), a critical instrument for funding social services, is set to be merged into broader National and Regional Partnership Plans ([NRPPs](#)). While the NRPPs aim to streamline programming and reporting, they risk weakening the dedicated focus on social inclusion, child poverty, and material support for the most deprived. Under the current Multiannual Financial Framework (2021–2027), at least 25% of ESF+ resources are earmarked for social inclusion, 5% for tackling child poverty, and 3% for material aid. These safeguards are absent in the Commission's current proposal, with Member States only encouraged, rather than required, to prioritise these areas.

Loss of horizontal and thematic enabling conditions

At the same time, horizontal and thematic enabling conditions under the current ESF+ provide an accountability framework to ensure that EU funding contributes to equality and delivers concrete social outcomes. Under the new proposal, only two horizontal enabling conditions remain: compliance with the Rule of Law and with the Charter of Fundamental Rights. Thematic enabling conditions, including those linked to the European Pillar of Social Rights ([EPSR](#)), have been removed, significantly weakening accountability in areas such as social inclusion, child poverty, deinstitutionalisation, and long-term care.

A Centralisation of power: regions and local governments left aside

Pooling EU funds under NRPPs risks also shifting decision-making away from municipalities and regional authorities, where social needs are best understood. NRPP governance framework currently does not guarantee meaningful

involvement of municipalities, regions, and social services in planning, implementation, or monitoring. This can easily lead to a top-down conditionality that threatens multi-level governance and the voice of local practitioners. Social need is contextual, and context lives locally.

Why the EU's 14% Social Spending Target Risks Missing Social Inclusion

The European Commission's current proposal to allocate 14 % of EU funding to "social spending" is too broad and risks being met without actually financing meaningful social inclusion programmes. Instead of earmarking funds for clearly defined actions such as community-based care, social inclusion programmes, or targeted integration support, the target could allow Member States to count a wide range of investments — including physical infrastructure like hospitals and other facilities — as fulfilling the social spending objective. This is especially likely given that the previous dedicated ESF+ budget line for social inclusion would be replaced, eliminating guaranteed minimum allocations for measures targeting exclusion, poverty, and vulnerable populations. As a result, large infrastructure investments or general services could satisfy the 14 % figure without delivering the direct, people-centred programmes that most effectively tackle social exclusion and promote inclusive participation in the community.

Uncertainty about cross border programmes

The current ESF+ includes programmes directly managed by the European Commission, promoting social innovation across Europe. The current ERDF foresees interregional cross border projects including on social issues. It is unclear whether such programmes will continue within the current proposal. ESN believes in the added value of cross EU cooperation funded through EU social funds. ESN members highlighted in a 2025 survey that they 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 through piloting and put in place training for their workforce. The future EU budget should keep programmes like EaSI because they enable social services to test, scale, and transfer innovative approaches, strengthening services capacity to respond effectively to evolving social needs.

Towards a new MFF that does not leave anyone behind

In this context, ESN urges EU institutions and Member States to ensure that the next MFF fully supports social services and social inclusion by:

Securing continued EU social funding:

- **Separate stand-alone ESF** that is backed by at least the same amount of the current ESF+ adjusted to inflation, which would mean 125 bn EUR in current prices. Of this amount, **25%** should be **earmarked to social inclusion** -as it is currently the case, meaning at least 31 bn EUR.
- ESF should prioritise **investment in personal targeted social services**, community-based social services, family and children's social welfare

services, and support the workforce in the transformation towards community-based care and support.

Reinstating enabling conditions and safeguards:

- **Reintroduce thematic enabling conditions linked to the EPSR** to ensure investments deliver measurable social outcomes.
- **Align budget with the European Semester** and social policy objectives, including specific country-specific reports and recommendations
- **Link programme funding to evidence-based performance indicators**, including access to services, care quality, and people-reported outcomes.

Strengthening the partnership principle and multi-level governance:

- Ensure **regional and local authorities are meaningfully involved** in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of EU-funded programmes, as in current ESF+ governance, where there are national and regional committees involved and regional and local authorities are involved at all programming stages.
- Introduce mechanisms for **local co-decision**, bottom-up consultation, and iterative learning to ensure funding responds to local realities.
- **Regional and local social services departments must be formal signatories to NRPP governance and be able to oppose measures that misunderstand local needs.**

Ensure Cross European knowledge exchange

- The **future EU budget should keep programmes like EaSI** or similar to enable social services to promote knowledge exchange and mutual learning, test, scale, and transfer innovative approaches, strengthening services capacity to respond effectively to evolving social needs.

Subsidiarity through design:

- A **separate, standalone ESF+**, which cannot be reallocated without local consent and simplify processes for small-scale community programmes.

Prioritising community- and family-based care:

- Promote the transition from institutional to **community- and family-based social services.**
- Support **modernisation of social services**, including workforce development, skills training, and innovation.

- Establish a [care guarantee](#) to ensure access to high-quality social services for people in need.

With these measures, the next MFF can protect and strengthen social services, reduce inequalities, and uphold Europe's social and territorial cohesion. ESN stands ready to work with the European Parliament, the European Commission Member States, and local and regional authorities to ensure that EU funds reach those who need them most and that social services remain a cornerstone of a fairer, more inclusive Europe.