



European
Social
Network

Leading
Social Services

EP Elections Briefing

PROMOTING A PEOPLE'S EUROPE

Introduction

Ahead of the 2019 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 is based on an analysis of manifestos from the political parties participating in the elections and a questionnaire submitted to ESN member organisations.

What the political parties say

Having reviewed the manifestos, it is fair to say that social services are low on the agenda for European political parties competing in the European elections. However, there are some differences in the social dimension of their manifestos and the extent to which they call for European action on social exclusion, poverty, inequality and ageing.

Despite calls for a strong welfare state, state responsibility for protecting the vulnerable, and action on poverty and social exclusion from the Party of the European Socialists (PES), the Greens and the Party of the European Left, they have relatively few concrete proposals on how Europe can and should better support social services. Notable exceptions are PES' proposal for a Child Guarantee and the Greens' commitment to the implementation of the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities (UNCPRD).

Though the European People's Party (EPP) speaks of the need to promote families, they propose little to support them, and social Europe is noticeably absent from both the Alliance of Liberal Democrats in Europe (ALDE) and the Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists in Europe (ACRE) manifestos.

Below we provide a short analysis of the manifestos of each political party and their proposals on social inclusion and social services.

Party of European Socialists & Democrats (PES)

Overall, many of PES' social policy goals imply strong social services, emphasising for instance the state's "duty to protect those in need (...)" and the importance of tackling social exclusion, but their policy proposals are usually broad. For example, they demand "a New Social Contract for Europe", and formulate their understanding of social policy in Europe as follows:

"A Europe of welfare with strong welfare states, social safety nets and quality public services is crucial to preventing poverty and protecting those in need, including youth, elderly people, vulnerable workers and the unemployed. We have a duty to protect people if they fall sick, lose their job, suffer disabilities or fall on hard times. The right to quality healthcare, education and decent pensions is universal and must be defended". While we at ESN welcome the commitment to protecting the vulnerable, which is in line with our mission, we regret that PES does not explicitly refer to the right to quality social services as they do with healthcare and education.

In concrete policy terms, they demand “a Social Action Plan” which would “turn the EU Pillar of Social Rights into binding rules” as well as a “European Child Guarantee” so that every child has “access to quality healthcare, childcare, education, housing and nutrition”. At ESN we welcome the proposal to support children, but we believe that this should also extend to a care guarantee for those children and young people who are in disadvantaged situations like children and young people in care, as we proposed in our [response](#) to the European Commission’s consultation on the European Pillar of Social Rights.

European People’s Party (EPP)

The EPP frames the European social model as something which is already a success and should be preserved, rather than something which requires further development, or which must respond to pressing social issues: “We are proud of our unique European social model, where everyone enjoys health insurance and high-quality public services, where workers have their rights and where social interests and market forces are balanced.”

The centrepiece of the EPP social inclusion narrative is the family: “Our families are our roots, our homes, our safety nets, and the centre of our European identities. They are the pillar of our European way of life. Family bonds are the backbone of our community, and we intend to preserve them”. However, in concrete policy terms, the EPP focuses on measures to support families via better employment and a general commitment to “safeguard family values”. This means that there is no reference to the need to support families in need with public social services or social care.

European Greens

Like PES, the European Greens set out a vision of European societies which includes references to public services, but with a few more concrete policy proposals. These proposals refer to decent income, childcare and the implementation of the UNCRP, although it is debatable to what extent these they currently would fall under EU, rather than national, competence. They demand that “Everyone in Europe should have the right to a decent income and basic public services (...)”.

In addition to decent income, the Greens call for “a real improvement in accessible and affordable high-quality childcare” and for Europe to take “a leading role in implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities” and for “people with disabilities to be included in decisions which concern them”. While ESN welcomes the Greens policy proposals’ focus on people with disabilities and their involvement in decisions affecting them, we also note that this focus is mostly on accessibility (e.g. of the built environment), rather than on support or care services.

The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats (ALDE)

The ALDE manifesto does not address social policy and focuses largely on the economy, with some discussion of education. They also propose that cohesion policy be linked to the European Semester to “support the implementation of structural reforms”. This relays cohesion mostly as a tool for macroeconomic conditionality, an idea which left-wing parties (e.g. PES [here](#)) and trade

unions (e.g. ETUC [here](#)) have criticised. They argue that funds to support the most vulnerable parts of Europe should not be used as an instrument in pushing economic austerity policies which damage public services, whilst exacerbating social issues.

Party of the European Left

The European Left's manifesto is generally more abstract and less concrete than those of the other parties. They criticise "the submission of public services" and "the dismantlement and privatisation of social security". Criticising "global capitalism", they call for a large-scale economic reorientation: "The 'stability pact' and the European Central Bank orientations must be challenged so as to work towards another economic and social policy and social priorities in favour of full employment and training, public services (...). We are in favour of modernized, decentralized and democratized public services which ensure social rights for everyone."

The Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists in Europe (ACRE)

ACRE has no mention of local public social services or social inclusion, as they clearly see this as the remit of national governments.

What our members say

ESN sent a questionnaire to its member organisations in April. The questionnaire included a series of questions to find out the issues our members think MEPs should support as a policy priority in the next parliamentary term. The questionnaire focused specifically on promoting access to quality social services, including support for children and families, long-term care, and promoting social inclusion.

We received 21 replies from 14 European countries, covering Western, Northern, Southern, Central and Eastern Europe: Austria, Portugal, Germany, Hungary, Spain, Sweden, France, Malta, Belgium, Greece, Lithuania, Croatia, Romania, and Finland. Most respondents were directors with responsibility for social services, including planning, development, management, financing, and research.

86% of members surveyed think that MEPs should make "promoting access and coverage of quality social services" a priority in the next term. This is in line with our internal findings, and as such the focus of our annual [27th European Social Services Conference](#) this year will be on quality social services in light of our request to the European Commission to review the [European Quality Framework for Social Services](#).

The theme of quality is followed by "reducing poverty" (71% of respondents) in a context where our members have pointed out to an increase in social needs and people using public social services during the [crisis](#), despite the reduction in funding. Looking even closer, the same number emphasised that MEPs should focus policy efforts on family and child support services and the efficiency and quality of long-term care services. With the demand for services increasing, people living longer and higher expectations for quality of life, social services costs are very high for many local services, hence the policy focus requested from our members.

These were followed by housing and homeless support (62% of respondents) at a time when several ESN members have reported an increase in homelessness and a corresponding diversion of resources to support [them](#). Members also responded that MEPs should devote attention to supporting employment for those who are hardest to reach, such as people with disabilities and the long-term unemployed, as recently pointed out by our publication on [inclusive activation](#).

Social services quality

67% of members considered it very important that MEPs focus on assessing access and coverage on the one hand, and the development and implementation of quality standards on the other. More specifically, several members asked MEPs to bring forward a proposal for the European Commission to review the current European Quality Framework for Social Services.

Members also felt that future work on quality should address adequate funding (62%) and workforce recruitment and retention (52%). Attracting and retaining staff in social services and social care was part of a wider ESN study on the [workforce](#) produced in 2017, which made specific requests to the European Commission regarding further work on the recognition of qualifications and promotion of mobility to address staff gaps. More recently, ESN also held a [roundtable](#) at the European Parliament on how future EU funds can be used for the development of social services. At this meeting, we emphasised the importance of improved management, reporting and participation of regional and local social services in defining national criteria and funding priorities.

Children and Families

Promoting the best interest of the child is at the core of local public children's services. 81% of respondents therefore highlighted preventative work with families to avoid having to take children into care as a policy area they considered very important for future MEPs' attention. Specifically, ESN members requested MEPs work on policies addressing the link between universal services such as the provision and quality of early childcare and specialist child protection services (62%). 76% called on future MEPs to prioritise young people in care, along the lines of [ESN's proposal](#) that the Youth Guarantee is reinforced with a 'care guarantee' for disadvantaged young people, including care leavers.

Long Term Care

EU citizens aged 65 and over can expect less than half of their remaining life to be free from conditions affecting their ability to manage their daily lives, hence there has been a reported increase in the need for long-term care. 76% of ESN members therefore considered it very important that MEPs promote policies that improve integrating health and social care, an area of work studied by ESN in our [report](#) on integrated services. This was closely followed by workforce issues, in particular recruitment and retention of formal carers (57%), and support for informal carers (43%).

Housing & Homelessness

The consequences of the crisis have meant that public social services are increasingly involved in supporting housing services to care for people at risk of eviction and the increasing numbers of homeless people. 62% of respondents to the questionnaire therefore called on MEPs to focus

policy efforts on the affordability and availability of housing for people on low incomes, closely followed by the availability of social housing (57%).

Reducing poverty

According to figures released by Eurostat in October 2018, 22.4% of Europeans were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Locally, our members are used to working with people who have a particular or multiple problem in their lives, such as alcoholism, drug abuse, family breakdown or mental health problems.

76% therefore stressed the importance of policy initiatives that advance the further integration of social protection and social services to support people at risk of exclusion. This was followed by the importance of policies promoting inclusive eligibility conditions (71%), and adequate social protection and awareness of available social services to improve services take-up (62%).

Our requests for future MEPs

Our analysis of the election manifestos suggests several things. Whilst some parties are significantly better than others in arguing for social Europe, social services seem low on the agenda for all European parties. While this is in part a question of subsidiarity (social services are not regulated at a European level), social services remain at the forefront of tackling many of the issues the political parties point to – including poverty, social exclusion, inclusion of people with disabilities, children’s vulnerability or family support.

Given the critical role that social services play in promoting social inclusion, ESN requests MEPs prioritise a series of policy proposals in the field of social services and social inclusion.

- Improve quality in social services, specifically with the review of the European Quality Framework for Social Services.
- Advance recognition of qualifications to promote mobility and address recruitment gaps in the field of social services and social care.
- Secure funding for social inclusion under the European Structural Funds, promoting improved management, reporting and participation of regional and local social services in defining national criteria and funding priorities.
- Include a ‘care guarantee’ in mainstream policies to support disadvantaged children and young people, like those in care, with a disability, or not in education.
- Improve funding for integrated long-term care for older people.
- Improve coordination of social services and social protection benefits to fight social exclusion.

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