



European
Social
Network

Social Services
in Europe



Bringing together Europe and local communities

Social services priorities for the
European Semester 2018

*Investing
in people*



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"If we want to avoid social fragmentation and social dumping in Europe, then Member States should agree on the European Pillar of Social Rights as soon as possible and at the latest at the Gothenburg summit in November. National social systems will still remain diverse and separate for a long time. But at the very least, we should agree on a European Social Standards Union in which we have a common understanding of what is socially fair in our single market."

Jean-Claude Juncker, State of the Union Speech, 13 September 2017



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Working at
EU level

Bringing together Europe and local communities

Social services priorities for the
European Semester 2018

Planning local
public social
services

About the European Social Network (ESN)

The European Social Network (ESN) is the independent network for local public social services in Europe. It brings together people who plan, finance, research, manage, regulate and deliver local public social services, including health, social welfare, employment, education and housing. We support the development of effective social policy and social care practice through the exchange of knowledge and experience.

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About this report

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The Reference Group was launched in 2014. It aims to give visibility to social issues and the challenges faced by public social services at local level within the framework of the European Semester – the cycle of economic and social policy coordination between the EU and its Member States.

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Abbreviations

Countries

AT	AUSTRIA
BE	BELGIUM
CY	CYPRUS
CZ	CZECH REPUBLIC
DK	DENMARK
DE	GERMANY
EE	ESTONIA
EL	GREECE
ES	SPAIN
IE	IRELAND
FI	FINLAND
FR	FRANCE
HR	CROATIA
HU	HUNGARY
IT	ITALY
LV	LATVIA
LT	LITHUANIA
NL	THE NETHERLANDS
PL	POLAND
PT	PORTUGAL
RO	ROMANIA
SE	SWEDEN
SI	SLOVENIA
UK	UNITED KINGDOM

Others

EU	EUROPEAN UNION
EC	EUROPEAN COMMISSION
CSR	COUNTRY-SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATION(S)
NRP	NATIONAL REFORM PROGRAMME
ESIF	EUROPEAN STRUCTURAL AND INVESTMENT FUNDS
ESF	EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND
DI	DEINSTITUTIONALISATION
LTC	LONG-TERM CARE

1. Public social services and the European Semester

ESN's Reference Group on the European Semester

As part of its four-year strategy 2014-2017, the European Social Network (ESN) launched a Reference Group (hereafter 'the Group') to give greater prominence to social issues and the challenges faced by social services in the framework of the European Semester, the cycle of economic and social policy coordination that takes place between the EU and its Member States. The members of the Group hold managerial responsibilities in local and regional authorities, where they plan, manage and implement social services, and within social care and social work professional associations¹.

Public social services at local level have a major role in implementing policies to encourage the social inclusion of all groups, especially the most vulnerable. As outlined in the European Commission's 'Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change'², social services are key to helping modernise social protection systems and supporting the development of adequate social protection schemes in local communities throughout Europe.

ESN's Reference Group on the European Semester explores how social services issues concerning vulnerable people such as children, adults with disabilities or mental health problems and older people are addressed at national and European levels. It also develops specific recommendations to feed into the European Semester from the perspective of public local social services.

Methodology³

- The questionnaires

The ESN secretariat drafted 22 questionnaires, one per country represented in the Group. The questionnaires focused on specific social issues extracted from the European Commission's country reports⁴. Members of the Reference Group were asked to comment on those relating to their respective country. The aim was to assess whether the European Commission's analysis of social issues in the country profiles had any gaps, particularly regarding the challenges faced by public social services at local level. The questions within the questionnaires varied depending on the key issues highlighted by the Commission's country reports and the relevant reforms planned or implemented in each Member State.

¹For a complete list of members of the Reference Group, please see 'Acknowledgements' on page 4.

²Jean-Claude Juncker (15 July 2014) 'A New Start for Europe: My Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change'. Political Guidelines for the next European Commission. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/priorities/docs/pg_en.pdf (last accessed 20 October 2017)

³ESN members can access all background resources, such as our Guidelines on the European Semester Reference Group, in the members' area: <http://www.esn-eu.org/members-events/89/index.html>

⁴The country reports represent the European Commission's annual analysis of the economic and social challenges in the EU Member States. These reports are published in February each year and point early on to the challenges that each Member State should address. The country reports can be downloaded at: http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/making-it-happen/country-specific-recommendations/index_en.htm (last accessed 26 October 2017)

The questionnaires followed a similar structure of key themes when reflecting issues raised in the European Commission country reports and planned reforms ongoing within Member States. These included the following:

1. Social protection, social inclusion and governance
2. Unemployment and enhanced coordination between social and employment services
3. Housing provision and addressing housing exclusion
4. The role of EU funding in promoting social services
5. Young people: early school leaving and youth (un)employment
6. Children's services: poverty and social inclusion, community care, early childcare
7. Older people: long-term care and service provision
8. People with disabilities and people with mental health problems: employment; development of community care services
9. Other vulnerable groups: migrants, Roma and other minorities.

- **The annual meeting**

Having completed the questionnaire, the Group members gathered on 11 September 2017 with officials from the European Commission and experts from the European Social Observatory, to discuss and analyse their contributions ⁵. They drew up recommendations on the best ways to involve local authorities and public social services in the European Semester process, notably in the context of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) (see below).

- **The report**

Information contained in this report about each country has been gathered through (a) the analysis of the questionnaires filled in by the members, (b) the country profiles drafted by ESN and (c) the debates held in the September meeting.

Section one describes the European Semester and recent EU initiatives in the field of social policy, such as the EPSR.

Section two is a cross-country comparison that identifies the key challenges confronting public local social services across Europe and significant developments in social policy. In addition, the comparison identifies examples of concrete initiatives undertaken by local public social services or regional/national governments which were highlighted by the members.

Section three gathers ESN members' views on the adequacy and completeness of the Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) for 2017-2018 addressed to their countries.

Finally, Group members were asked to provide one recommendation they would like the European Commission to make to their country in the framework of the 2018 European Semester process. Recommendations are followed by a short explanation of the rationale behind them. More detailed country profiles are available in section four of the report.

⁵See also ESN's news article 'Reinforcing the role of local public social services in the European Semester'. Available at: <http://www.esn-eu.org/news/965/index.html>

Key developments in the European Semester 2016-2017

2017 has been the seventh cycle of the European Semester, the governance arrangements through which the EU coordinates the macro-economic and social policies of its Member States. After seven cycles, the governance procedures of the Semester appear now to be established, as do the messages and priorities emerging from the process; for example, through the Annual Growth Survey (AGS) and the Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs).

Two important developments took place in 2016 and 2017. First, the willingness of the European Commission to better involve social stakeholders in the process and, second, the consultation (2016) and subsequent publication in 2017 of a Commission Recommendation on the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR).

Opening up the Semester process: towards an enhanced role for social stakeholders?

The European Semester has often been depicted as a bureaucratic process, characterised by a low level of 'ownership' by non-institutional stakeholders and, in particular, by those working in social affairs. However, with the current Commission, there have been some attempts at improving stakeholder involvement, in particular social partners. There are probably two main reasons. First, the European Commission is searching for up-to-date information and evidence from the ground. Second, the Commission is looking for partners to help with the implementation of the Semester Recommendations.

Regarding social partners' involvement, studies⁶ point to three key developments. First, the increasing number of pathways (at European level) through which social partner organisations are involved in the Semester. Second, a move from 'ex-post' consultation (after publication) on key documents of the Semester to 'ex-ante' consultation (e.g. on the country reports). Third, and maybe most interestingly, there are more direct contacts between national organisations and the European Commission. For example, national social partner representatives are invited to Brussels to discuss directly with the Commission the contents of the draft country reports with the European Commission. In addition, national organisations have increased contact with the European Semester officers⁷ in national capitals and with representatives of the European Commission engaged in fact-finding and political visits to the Member States.

What could be the implication of these developments for local public social services? When it comes to channelling messages and priorities to the European Commission, local public social services have only been involved through ESN and the annual meeting of its Reference Group, where Commission representatives participate. However, there is a need for local social services representatives to improve contact with the Semester officers if their voices and concerns are to be heard, and to be involved in the Commission fact-finding missions on the ground. Furthermore, in order to be effective, service representatives should try to coordinate their actions with other national social actors including NGOs (whose role in social policy is increasingly important) and social partner organisations.

⁶Sabato, S., Vanhercke, B. and S. Spasova (2017.), *Listened to but not heard? Social partners' involvement in the European Semester*, OSE Research paper. No. 35, Brussels: European Social Observatory, March 2017.

⁷European Semester officers are EC representatives based in the Member States, dealing with social and macro-economic issues. They are supposed to gather relevant information from national actors and to refer back to Brussels.

The European Pillar of Social Rights: the EC proposal (2016)

On 9 September 2015, President Juncker in his State of the Union address in the European Parliament⁸ announced the establishment of a European Pillar of Social Rights (hereafter ‘the Pillar’). This initiative is part of the work undertaken by the Commission for a deeper and fairer Economic and Monetary Union (EMU)⁹ and the commitment of the current European Commission to create a Europe worthy of a ‘Social Triple A’ rating¹⁰. The ambition of the Pillar is to represent “[...] a reference framework to screen the employment and social performance of participating Member States, to drive reforms at national level and, more specifically, to serve as a compass for renewed convergence within the euro area”¹¹.

The first preliminary outline of the European Pillar of Social Rights sets out the key social objectives and values inscribed in EU primary law¹². Nonetheless, it is not intended to be enshrined in law, i.e. form part of the European Treaties. Instead of amending the European social acquis or replacing existing rights, the Pillar should build on and complement the legal status quo, ensuring that common rules remain up-to-date. In the Commission’s words, the purpose of the Pillar is to ‘operationalise’ existing social rights¹³. It will serve as a framework to revisit the EU’s employment and social performance in the context of changing work patterns and societies, and guide policies in several fields essential for well-functioning and fair labour markets and welfare systems in participating Member States¹⁴.

Therefore, by establishing the Pillar, the Commission intends to pursue two complementary work strands¹⁵:

- Modernising and addressing the gaps in existing social policy legislation to take account of today’s work environment and to ensure that new models of work maintain a fair balance in the relationship between employers and workers
- Identifying social benchmarks with a view to upward convergence about the functioning of the labour market, skills and social protection.

⁸Jean-Claude Juncker, State of the Union 2015. See more at: https://ec.europa.eu/priorities/state-union-2015_en (last accessed 20 October 2017)

⁹European Commission (2015) Commission Work Programme 2016 ‘No time for business as usual’. Strasbourg, 27 October 2015, COM(2015) 610 final.

¹⁰In his October 2014 speech to the European Parliament, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker declared his ambition for the EU to achieve what he called a ‘social triple A’ rating, in parallel to being ‘triple A’ in the financial sense. See also the Five Presidents’ report, available at: http://ec.europa.eu/priorities/sites/beta-political/files/5-presidents-report_en.pdf (last accessed 20 October 2016)

¹¹European Commission (2016) Communication ‘Launching a consultation on a European Pillar of Social Rights’. Strasbourg, 8 March 2016, COM(2016) 127 final.

¹²European Commission, Communication ‘Launching a consultation on a European Pillar of Social Rights’. Strasbourg, 8 March 2016, COM(2016) 127 final.

¹³European Commission (2016) Towards a European Pillar of Social Rights – Questions and Answers. Factsheet, Strasbourg, 8 March 2016. Available at: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-16-545_en.htm (last accessed 20 October 2017)

¹⁴The Pillar is conceived to be established within the euro area, but would also be open for other Member States to join on a voluntary basis.

¹⁵Commission Work Programme 2016, op. cit.

2017: The first steps of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR)

After a wide consultation on the draft EPSR held during 2016, the European Commission published the final version of the EPSR on the 26 April 2017¹⁶. The publication of the EPSR is part of a wider set of initiatives concerning the future of the European Union and the strengthening of its social dimension, including the publication of a 'White paper on the Future of the European Union'¹⁷ and of a 'Reflection paper on the Social Dimension of Europe'¹⁸. The Reflection paper suggests three options for the future of social Europe: (a) to limit the social dimension to free movement; (b) those who want to do more, could do more in the social field; and (c) the EU27 could deepen the social dimension together.

As for its structure, the EPSR, which primarily concerns the euro area but is applicable to all EU Member States wishing to take part, consists of a list of 20 'key principles', framed as 'rights', organised around three chapters (see Table 1):

- 1) Equal opportunities and access to the labour market;
- 2) Fair working conditions;
- 3) Social protection and inclusion.

The Recommendation of the EPSR is accompanied by a Social Scoreboard¹⁹. The scoreboard, made up of 14 headline indicators and a number of secondary indicators, serves as a reference framework to monitor social progress, in a tangible, holistic and objective way, which is easily accessible and understandable for citizens. It aims to identify the most significant employment and social challenges facing the Member States, the EU and the euro area, as well as progress achieved over time on implementation of the EPSR.

While representing the most promising initiative in EU social policies in the last few years, there are doubts about its implementation. It is important to note that it is a non-binding initiative to be mainly implemented through non-binding policy instruments, primarily the European Semester (eg. the CSRs). This said, however, while the impact on Member States is still uncertain, the publication of the Pillar seems to have revitalised the EU social agenda, which has been dormant for a number of years. Indeed, the Pillar has been accompanied by a proposal for legislative measures on [work-life balance](#) and [social protection for all types of jobs](#), as well as a [communication](#) and [Staff Working Document on the Working Time Directive](#).

¹⁶European Commission (2017), Commission Recommendation on the European Pillar of Social Rights, C (2017) 2600 of 26.4.2017.

¹⁷European Commission (2017), White paper on the future of Europe and the way forward. Reflections and scenarios for the EU27 by 2025, COM (2017) 2025 of 1 March 2017.

¹⁸European Commission (2017), Reflection paper on the social dimension of Europe, COM (2017) 206 of 26 April 2017.

¹⁹European Commission (2017) Commission Staff Working Document Accompanying the Communication Establishing a European Pillar of Social Rights – Social Scoreboard, SWD/2017/200 final of 26 April 2017.

Table 1: Structure of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR)

Chapter	Policy domain
I. Equal opportunities and access to the labour market	1. Education, training and life-long learning
	2. Gender equality
	3. Equal opportunities
	4. Active support to employment
	5. Secure and adaptable employment
II. Fair working conditions	6. Wages
	7. Information about employment conditions and protection in case of dismissals
	8. Social dialogue and involvement of workers
	9. Work-life balance
	10. Healthy, safe and well-adapted work environment and data protection
III. Social Protection and inclusion	11. Childcare and support to children
	12. Social protection
	13. Unemployment benefits
	14. Minimum income
	15. Old age income and pensions
	16. Health care
	17. Inclusion of people with disabilities
	18. Long-term care
	19. Housing and assistance for the homeless
	20. Access to essential services

Source: adapted from European Commission Recommendation on the European Pillar of Social Rights.

2. Cross country comparison

The responses to the country questionnaires provided a wealth of information concerning the social situation and the activities of local public services to address a range of social exclusion issues. Nine cross country key themes have been selected:

- 1) Administrative reforms and the financial aspects;
- 2) Reforms of health and social care services;
- 3) Deinstitutionalisation and community care;
- 4) Labour market integration;
- 5) Poverty and social exclusion;
- 6) Initiatives targeted to the youth;
- 7) Initiatives targeted to children and children's services;
- 8) The social integration of migrants;
- 9) Homelessness and housing exclusion.

For each of these themes, we provide an overview of the key messages and country-specific, relevant examples.

2.1 Administrative reforms and financing challenges

ESN reports from recent years have been highlighting administrative reforms as a key issue for social services. Planned or implemented reforms have addressed four aspects: 1) the distribution of responsibilities between the various levels of government; 2) social services financing; 3) differences between regions in the quality and availability of social services; and 4) issues related to staff management. This year, ESN members (e.g. AT, CZ, LV, FR, SI, BE, RO, NL, PT) have also described several planned or implemented reforms though the assessment of their efficiency is not always positive.

Regarding the distribution of responsibilities between the various levels of government, the representative from the French association of social services directors highlighted that the administrative reform implemented in France over the past six years has failed to address the overlaps between services. In Belgium, ESN members argue that the 6th State reform has led to difficulties in coordinating social service provision. In order to address this challenge, the Belgian government has set up a working group to compare the conditions and legislation for the provision of non-contributory social assistance schemes.

Social service financing is highlighted as an important issue in most countries. For example, in the Czech Republic, the amendment to the Act on social services aims to address differences in the financing and organisation of social services and create uniform financing rules across regions. However, the initiative consists of non-binding recommendations, and the fate of the amendment is uncertain due to the recent elections in the country.

Differences between regions are particularly evident in Romania, where the urban/rural divide remains a serious problem. Moreover, it is difficult to retain skilled and professional staff due to budget constraints, according to the representative of Romania's Centre for Training and Assessment in Social Work.

2.2 Reforms of health and social care services: still a key issue

Due to population ageing, the increase in health-related expenditure and budget constraints, healthcare reforms are central in virtually all EU Member States. As noted by the Belgian member, the key challenge is to deal with the growing number of people in need and the increasing complexity of these needs. This issue was touched upon by a number of ESN members (e.g. BE, FI, PL, SI, ES, UK (Scotland)).

A key challenge is the integration of health and social services: attempts to achieve this are underway in several countries but difficulties persist. For instance, in Poland, the challenge is particularly pressing given the growing number of older people. According to its representative, the Janusz Korczak Pedagogical University, the public long-term care system is not keeping pace with this process, and the gap is being filled, although partially, by private providers whose availability is, nevertheless, limited.

In Slovenia, a specific law has been passed to address health and social care integration: the Law on personal assistance of February 2017 that is to be implemented from January 2019. Personal assistance services will be managed by centres of social work and will cover home assistance concerning daily tasks, assistance at work and in education. People will be free to choose their personal assistance and to elaborate, together with the provider, a tailor-made implementation plan.

As mentioned above, reforms are ongoing but their results are not always optimal. For instance, in Finland, the representative of the Association of Directors of Social Services points to shortcomings of the much debated 'freedom of choice' reform. These include inadequate estimates of the effects and impact of the proposal, lack of integration between social and health services, and the risk of increasing inequalities between citizens/service users. In other words, the risk is that the reform will lead to increased inequalities between the regions.

2.3 The long road towards deinstitutionalisation and community care

Deinstitutionalisation and the development of community care are topics which have been addressed at length in previous ESN reports. These issues are again prominent this year (e.g. BG, CZ, FR, PT, RO). Initiatives presented by ESN members concern the deinstitutionalisation of adults, people with mental health problems, people with disabilities, children and the availability of care services across the national territory.

For instance, in Bulgaria, the process of deinstitutionalisation of adults is progressing and a special fund has been devoted to the setting up of new services. New projects have been set-up to provide integrated services covering both the health and social aspects of long-term care, in particular to support older people at home. The next step is the establishment of multi-disciplinary home support teams. The idea is to pilot the new services through EU funds and have them subsequently included in the new legislation on social services.

In the Czech Republic, more attention should be paid to people with mental health problems. Deinstitutionalisation of the Czech mental health care system is part of the psychiatric care reform, which has been in preparation since 2013. The aim of the reform is to improve the quality of life of people with mental health problems and to encourage the move from institutions to community care. However, the reform is still being discussed in discussion groups, expert seminars and conferences and its implementation is still far.

In France, the representative of the French Association of Directors of Social Services, expressed optimism about the so-called *“Réponse accompagnée pour tous”*, a multi-institutional programme aimed at ensuring that all people with disabilities receive support. The approach is being gradually tried out across the national territory. While community care for people with disabilities is progressing, the French member complains of a lack of progress in promoting foster care for children in the child protection system with numbers of children in institutional and foster care varying significantly between local authorities.

2.4 Labour market integration: is ‘activation’ always the right solution for the most vulnerable?

When it comes to labour market integration, three issues have been raised by ESN members (e.g. AT, BE, BG, CZ, DK, DE, FI, IT, PT, ES). First, the adequacy of activation measures and negative incentives for employment. Second, difficulties in integrating specific groups, particularly the long-term unemployed. Third, the coordination between employment and social services.

Regarding conditionality, in Austria financial support for the unemployed is linked to people's availability for jobs. In order to avoid losing their benefits, people are forced to accept jobs that are below their qualification level. If they refuse to accept a job offer, they risk losing their benefits. According to available data, more than 105,000 sanctions per year have been imposed by Austrian labour market services. Similarly, in Finland, negative incentives for the unemployed have been heavily criticised by the political opposition and NGOs. According to a law proposed by the government, unemployed persons will have to apply for one job each week, otherwise they will lose their unemployment benefits. Also in Finland NGOs, which are playing an increasing role in service provision, have expressed concerns about the marketisation of services for the unemployed, as these services are often not able to reach the most marginalised groups.

Labour market integration of the most vulnerable emerges as a significant challenge for social services. In France, social services are struggling to support the labour market integration of the

most vulnerable. One concern is that the focus of employment services is on the most 'employable', with social services 'giving up' on the less employable (creaming effect), who are then left with minimum income support but no prospects. Yet positive initiatives have also emerged. For instance, in Denmark, new measures have been implemented to improve the long-term sustainability of jobs for the most vulnerable: a holistic and interdisciplinary approach will be developed, involving collaboration between employment and social services and aimed at providing individualised support. In Germany, 'centres for activation' have been established. These centres work together with local social services, including debt or drug counselling.

When it comes to coordination between employment and social services, the Belgian member points to the fact that with the 6th State reform, competences for activation policies (and employment centres) are regional while social services are managed at the local level, a circumstance which poses coordination problems. Similarly, in Poland, cooperation between employment and social services is underdeveloped. More positively, in Bulgaria, the new centres for employment and social assistance (coordinating employment services, social assistance and social benefits) are showing positive results.

2.5 The economy is slowly recovering but poverty and social exclusion remain a burning issue

Although the economy and the employment rate are slowly recovering in most EU Member States, poverty and social exclusion are still a major issue for social services in several countries (e.g. BE, BG, CZ, FR, DE, IE, IT, PT, RO, ES). Eurostat data (2017) show that, in 2010, 23.7% of the population were at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE). In 2015 the level was similar (23.8%). Yet, the situation differs widely between Member States, ranging from 41.3% in Bulgaria to 14% in the Czech Republic. ESN members highlight the situation of some groups, such as older people, children, people with disabilities and the Roma.

For instance, in Bulgaria, according to Pravda Ignatova, children's situation is improving slightly due to a new integrated approach to supporting children and their families. Yet the situation is particularly difficult when it comes to older people and the long-term unemployed. In addition, despite the contribution from European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), Roma people still face poverty and social exclusion, particularly due to the lack of education and professional training. In the Czech Republic the Government Agency for the Social Inclusion of Roma has been successful in many respects, such as the improvement of debt counselling services, education and employment (mainly through the creation of social enterprises). The Agency, however, has been less successful when it comes to housing.

In Germany, the introduction of a minimum wage has been a decisive step towards the reduction of in-work poverty, although, according to the Centre of Planning and Evaluation of Social Services, child poverty and older people's poverty are increasing. In Portugal, some improvement has taken place recently but due to austerity social services do not have enough resources to satisfy demand (a circumstance that leads to mistrust towards these services).

Some members have raised the issue of social and employment inclusion of people with disabilities. In the Czech Republic, the Ministry of Social Affairs recently submitted to the government an amendment to the Employment Act with proposals for the promotion of employment of people with disabilities, especially sheltered employment. In Ireland, a Comprehensive Employment Strategy for people with disabilities was launched in 2015, and a working group was established to look into removing disincentives for people with disabilities from entering the labour market. A major problem is the fact that, on entering employment, people with disabilities lose their entitlement to medical care, free travel and secondary benefits. To avoid this, the group recommended an increase in the income threshold for eligibility to a medical card, to dispense with the requirement that work should be 'rehabilitative', and that people with disabilities should be allowed to retain some secondary benefits after taking up employment for a period of time.

2.6 Youth initiatives: avoiding a lost generation

ESN members have pointed out to a number of initiatives targeted at young people, with a particular focus on the implementation of the Youth guarantee four years after it was launched (e.g. DK, SE, LV, RO, ES, FI, IT, UK (England)). As shown by Eurostat data (2017), youth unemployment (EU 28) has increased from 12% (2008) to 14.7% (2016). Such an increase has been particularly evident in the euro-area, where youth unemployment has risen from 12.5% (2008) to 17% (2016). Country performance varies with youth unemployment ranging between 38.4% in Greece to 6.2% in Germany.

In several countries, there have been positive developments. This is the case in Denmark, where young people under 30 must enrol in education to receive social benefits. The government is studying an initiative to extend this obligation (education or employment) to all young people younger than 25. Furthermore, a more holistic and coherent approach will be adopted, linking schools with job centres and social services. The reform will be implemented from July 2019.

In Sweden, a 90-day guarantee states that all young unemployed people should receive support which leads to a job or education before reaching 90 days of unemployment. According to the Association of Directors of Social Welfare Services, there is evidence that the 90-day guarantee has been effective in supporting young people into education and employment with more than 50% of those who qualify remaining successfully in employment after the 90-day period. However, there should be better and more systematic cooperation between the national employment agency and the municipalities. In this respect, 287 municipalities have already signed local cooperation agreements.

The implementation of the Youth Guarantee appears particularly difficult in Italy due to the lack of targeted policies and tools. Several implementation challenges have emerged. First, the low ratio of social workers to users (one case manager for every 354 users) makes it impossible to develop personalised services. Second, the abolition of the provinces (previously responsible for employment services) has dispersed the skills and resources needed to implement these policies. Third, there are striking geographical differences, with a higher percentage of NEETs in the south of the country. Fourth, there are information asymmetries, with young people aged 19-24 (more familiar with information technologies) more likely to be enrolled in the programme. Fifth, there is low interregional

mobility. Sixth, there is not a monitoring system in place. All in all, not all young people have the same opportunities to benefit from the Youth Guarantee, with those who are most vulnerable often excluded.

In several countries, there have been both positive and negative developments. This is the case in Latvia where, as of 2016, strategic partnerships have been established between the state and the municipalities for better integration of NEETs, as part of a national project 'To Know and to Do!', managed by the Agency of International Programmes for Youth. However, implementation has been difficult because of the strict criteria to access the programme. In Spain, although measures have been put in place and information improved, implementation of the Youth Guarantee is slow with the situation varying greatly across the regions.

In the UK, in England, according to the representative of the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services, 'earn to learn' policies are having positive effects, though their ability to reach the most disadvantaged youth is questioned. A national programme of Further Education reviews is underway, to look at issues of sustainability and quality, but there is a lack of focus on the supply side to ensure education and training opportunities are well matched with the interests of young people, their ability levels and the needs of the labour market.

2.7 Investing in the future: initiatives targeted at children and children's services

ESN members have referred to several initiatives targeted at children in their countries (e.g. CZ, IE, IT, PL, ES, UK) with a focus on the availability and affordability of childcare. Childcare is indeed important for both the development of children and enhancing parents' (in particular, mothers') participation in the labour market. This section mainly deals with initiatives aimed at improving access, availability and quality of children's services.

In the Czech Republic, the pilot project to establish a network of services for children entered its second phase in 2017 and was extended to several regions. About €5,400 million from the European Structural Fund (ESF) were invested to set up micro-nurseries. The aim of the project is to create a new system of services where care is provided to pre-school children and continuous education is given to professionals in these facilities. Based on the pilot, a comprehensive system of new types of micro-nurseries will be established, including a proposal for legislative changes.

In Ireland, children are entitled to the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (a scheme for free access to pre-school childcare) for two years (an increase of one year on 2016) and, according to the independent consultants from Ireland, the uptake has been positive. Furthermore, there is a proposal to upskill staff and childcare facilities, since governance arrangements and the quality of childcare remain an issue. In England, local authorities have made strong progress in extending free childcare to disadvantaged 2-year-old children. Yet further progress may be compromised by the introduction of 30 hours of free childcare for all 3 and 4-year-olds in September 2017. This policy assumes that the market, which has historically been funded through a mix of free (local authority-funded) hours alongside parental funded hours (usually at a higher rate) will be able to adapt, but this is to be seen. Furthermore, ongoing budget cuts to local authorities have meant that the national children's centres network, which includes targeted childcare provision, has continued to shrink and fragment.

In Poland against trends in other EU countries the pre-school obligatory year has been abolished. The representative from Janusz Korczak Pedagogical University points to a lack of understanding in Polish society of the importance of this stage of education. The lack of incentives for parents and the poor development of childcare facilities highlight inequalities between privileged and underprivileged families and between urban and rural areas.

2.8 The social integration of migrants: a challenge for social services

The migrant crisis is a considerable challenge for EU Member States, also highlighting divisions and lack of solidarity between EU countries. The social integration of migrants puts considerable pressure on social services (e.g. BE, DK, DE, FI, PL, SE, UK). ESN members point out that the barriers faced by social services for the integration of migrants include: difficulties in supporting their access to the labour market, lack of adequate skills, long and complex asylum procedures, and the situation of unaccompanied children.

In Belgium, a 2015 OECD report shows that, although immigrants make up one fifth of the Belgian working age population, their levels of integration in the labour market are poor, especially for non-EU immigrants. Consequently, immigrants are particularly vulnerable to poverty. According to the Belgian member, labour market integration of immigrants requires a two-fold strategy. On the one hand, specific policies should be implemented, including skills development and incentives to hire this group. On the other hand, the educational system should be fairer and more responsive to the needs of immigrant children.

In Denmark, cuts to social benefits have created serious challenges, especially in relation to housing. Consequently, joining the labour market to achieve autonomy is a priority for migrants. In order to promote such integration, the Danish member suggests four strategies. First, increasing cooperation with employers. Second, focusing on migrant women and children. Third, addressing language barriers. Fourth, increasing cooperation with NGOs.

In Germany, two laws were adopted in 2015 to address the immigration crisis: the Act on the Acceleration of Asylum Procedures and the Integration Act, which regulates benefits, labour market integration and residence. As reported by the German member of the Group, a distinction is drawn between refugees 'with good prospects' and those 'with no prospects' of remaining in Germany. Those with no prospects are partially excluded from integration measures and expected to return to their countries of origin more rapidly. Those with good prospects are provided with occupational and integration courses to help them gain residency.

In Poland, social workers lack the skills to support immigrants, and no specific initiatives have been taken. Furthermore, the Polish government opposed the EU reallocation programme for Syrian refugees. Little progress on the social inclusion of migrants has been reported by the English member: urgent progress will be required on the 'right to remain' for migrants settled in England if social inclusion is to improve. Government funding to facilitate the integration of Syrian refugees has enabled a planned programme of support for families arriving in England in 2016, and many councils have invested time and effort in this work.

Positive developments have been reported in some countries. When it comes to unaccompanied children, an improvement has been noted in Sweden thanks to the increased experience gained by social services and schools during the past two years. In Scotland, local authorities such as Renfrewshire Council have a dedicated team to support refugees and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, as well as strong partnerships with Police Scotland, higher education

institutions, the third sector and other community groups. Furthermore, several local authorities have also settled unaccompanied asylum-seeking children under the so-called 'Dubs Amendment'²⁰ and plan to settle more. Yet there is likely to be a funding shortfall, particularly when young people reach the age of 18.

In Finland, though the situation varies, municipalities generally implement comprehensive integration plans, and private initiatives have also been launched. In 2017, a social investment bond (SIB) managed by a bank and a bond managing company collected €3.4 million from private investors to place 2,000 immigrants on the labour market. The project should result in savings of €28 million for the State which, if the objectives are met, will pay revenue to the investors. Similarly, in Sweden, municipalities are taking several measures for the integration of immigrants, often funded through the ESF.

2.9 Homelessness and housing exclusion: an increasingly burning issue

Many ESN members have indicated homelessness and housing exclusion as a challenging issue to be addressed by social services (e.g. BG, DK, ES, IE, IT, LT, SE, UK). Issues of particular concern are: the growing cost of housing, evictions and lack of social housing. On a more positive note, evidence shows that Housing First projects are a good solution when it comes to addressing the challenge of homelessness and rough sleeping.

In Bulgaria, given the number of people in severe material deprivation, the housing situation of the most marginalised groups is a key challenge and a number of initiatives have been taken to address this problem. Social services are increasingly focusing on housing for particular target groups in socially excluded localities, such as the long-term unemployed and people with debt problems. According to the Bulgarian member, particular attention will be devoted to social housing through the construction of new houses or the restructuring of existing ones though it is up to the municipalities to decide how. Yet, it is not clear when a new government law on social housing will be approved. Similarly, in Denmark, the key challenge is the lack of affordable housing for people on a low income, such as those receiving social benefits or the working-poor.

In Ireland, the Children's Rights Alliance (2017) has warned of the poor conditions in emergency accommodation, giving rise to increased health and wellbeing needs for children and families in accommodation for the homeless. To address this situation, an Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness has been prepared. In Italy, there are mainly two types of initiatives addressing housing shortages: temporary accommodation subdivided into individual, collective and social inclusion housing; and individual accommodation for permanent residency.

In Lithuania, the National Progress Programme 2014-2020 has set the goal of increasing the availability of housing for vulnerable groups by 100% by 2020. Yet, progress is slow and, according to a report from the National Audit Office ('Housing access of low income receiving residents'), the rental-support is ineffective. In Sweden, the lack of social and affordable housing in many Swedish

²⁰A national scheme to enable a number of unaccompanied children to be granted asylum in the UK - even if they do not have a family connection in the country.

cities, already underlined in previous ESN reports, has been further exacerbated by the high number of refugees and migrants in need of housing. According to the representative from the Association of Directors of Social Welfare Services, in the absence of an active national housing policy, many Swedish municipalities have found it difficult to adequately support vulnerable people in need of housing support, as they often take on the role of landlord when they rent private flats to people in need.

On a more positive note, in Scotland in the UK figures for 2017 so far show an increase in the number of social housing units completed, but levels of new-build social housing remain far below those of a decade ago. In Spain, according to the National Statistics Institute, the number of foreclosures for primary residences fell by 30.9% in 2017. However, there are still a high number of families with housing-related debts due to job loss or instability. Social services continue to deal with cases of people who need mediation services to avoid eviction and look for alternative accommodation and financial support.

Meanwhile, an evaluation of Housing First projects in 24 Danish municipalities has been undertaken, with positive results. The evaluation has shown that 90% of the 1,500 cases assessed are able to retain their housing after six months. However, a particular concern is the situation of young homeless. Consequently, based on the experience of Housing First, a model specifically targeted at young people aged 18 – 24 has been developed, consisting of a model for interdisciplinary cooperation and transition housing for people in unstable life situations until they are ready for permanent housing.

3. Adequacy of the 2017 country reports

Over time, both the importance of the country reports in the European Semester and the level of detail of the analysis contained have increased. Yet, according to ESN members, there are still gaps or areas where more attention is required. In Table 2, we list these gaps as reported by the Group members.

Table 2. Gaps in the country reports

Country	Gaps in the country reports or areas where more attention is needed
Austria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enactment of a basic landmark law on means-tested benefits to homogenise provisions on social inclusion • Enactment of a statutory minimum wage regime (1,500 – 1,700 Euro) • Adjust the minimum pension scheme as well as the means-tested benefits scheme • Focus on the social exclusion of children and youth by providing a guaranteed basic income for children combined with access to day care services free of charge
Czech Republic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruiting and retaining adequately trained staff in social services
Denmark	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addressing issues related to people with mental health problems; • Prevention of substance abuse; • A focus on social mobility
Finland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizens' engagement and participation in the development of health and social services
Germany	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training of health and social care professionals; • Issues related to people with disabilities
Ireland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resources for social services in rural areas; • Housing and homelessness
Italy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving the provision of long-term care services across the country
Latvia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessibility of the healthcare system; • Coordination between health and social services; • Management of EU funds
The Netherlands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A focus on social policy in addition to employment
Portugal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active ageing; • Integration of ethnic minority groups; • Gender equality; • Coordination between the various actors involved in social services provision
Romania	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support to victims of domestic violence; • Children with parents working abroad
Sweden	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial and personal support for people with disabilities
Slovenia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foster and community care services for children and families
UK (England)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adequate funding for social care



4. Country profiles

Austria

Budget cuts continue, diminishing the capabilities of public social services. For example, in Upper Austria, the €360 million social services budget has been cut by €25 million for the 2017 to 2019 period. As a result, social services have had to announce wage cuts, increase the workload for staff and reduce the quality of services provided²¹.

There are fears that the task orientated financing system, introduced in the 2017 financial equalisation law, will exacerbate this situation. The task orientated system²² is where public social services are given a single budget which must be divided between different departments (child protection, care for older persons, etc) according to priorities. However, the Austrian Association of Social Workers (OBDS) warns that these changes to financing may be hiding further cuts to social services.

Cuts to benefits and restrictions on access to the labour market risk marginalising refugees and migrants. New regulations have cut the means-tested minimum income scheme for refugees, a decision which the OBDS states is politically motivated. Further restrictions targeting migrants in secondary legislation produced by regional governments means that the average benefit amount of €844 can be reduced to €320 per month²³. Legal action by Austrian citizens who are also affected by the changes has started to challenge these new regulations that can greatly increase the risk of social exclusion for refugees²⁴. On top of this, policy regarding migrants' access to the labour market is limited. Asylum seekers can only work in the hospitality and agricultural sectors for a period of up to six months, or work as self-employed. These regulations hinder their ability to enter the labour market.

The OBDS therefore believes that the Austrian government can do much more to support migrants and refugees, and specifically advocates the improvement of language courses, which are a crucial service for supporting the inclusion of migrants.

New childcare places have been created, however there are serious shortcomings. An evaluation has identified significant differences in the availability of childcare between regions²⁵, and the OBDS states that there is a growing urban/rural divide in childcare availability. One review revealed numerous shortcomings in the provision of childcare²⁶; only 17.9% of childcare facilities allow for both parents to work full-time; 11.8% of municipalities do not provide childcare for children below the age of three; in 19.9% of municipalities afternoon childcare is missing; 24% of all kindergarten facilities do not provide lunch; and 38.9% of all childcare facilities open for fewer than eight hours per day.

Childcare in Austria also faces a challenge in supporting migrant and refugee children, who need German language skills to integrate in society. The OBDS states that Austria must ensure that all migrant and refugee children visit day-care facilities from the age of two, with an emphasis on German language learning and the inclusion of parents in the activities of these centres.

²¹Nachrichten (2016) Social organisations opposed to cuts. <http://www.nachrichten.at/nachrichten/politik/landespolitik/Sozialvereine-wehren-sich-gegen-neue-Kuerzungen:art383.2305073> (last accessed 01/11/17)

²²Roland Fürst, Wolfgang Hinte (2014) Socio-spatial orientation: professional institutional and financial aspects

²³UNHCR Austria (2016) Concern about limitation of minimum security in Upper Austria. <http://www.unhcr.org/dach/at/10106-sorge-ueber-einschraenkung-bei-mindestsicherung-in-ooe.html> (last accessed 01/11/17)

²⁴Der Standard (2017) After 37 working years meagre minimum income available in Lower Austria <http://derstandard.at/2000062121252/Niederoesterreicher-erhaelt-nach-37-Arbeitsjahren-nur-Mini-Mindestsicherung> (last accessed 01/11/17)

²⁵Baierl, A., M. Kaendl (2011) Childcare in Austria. ÖIF-Studie, Vienna.

²⁶AK-OÖ (2016) Child care map. <https://ooe.arbeiterkammer.at/beratung/berufundfamilie/kinderbetreuung/AKOOe-Kinderbetreuungsatlas.html> (last accessed 01/11/17)

There has been weak implementation of new legislation on child protection. The Child Protection Act (2013) introduced quality standards for risk assessment in active children's services cases. The most important standard was related to the principle of dual oversight, where cases are reviewed by two professionals. However, secondary legislation produced by regional governments not only weakened quality standards, but also failed to provide funding to employ the necessary number of social workers to fulfil legal obligations. This situation has been exacerbated by the reduction of time spent in direct contact with clients, which has been reduced from about 70% to 30% of the total working time, due to increased documentation demands and bureaucracy²⁷. Overall, social workers in child protection face excessive workloads, affecting the quality of services.

The labour market service (AMS) continues to pursue policies which force unemployed people into unsuitable work. People receiving financial support when unemployed are obliged to accept jobs offered by the AMS, or risk losing unemployment benefits. However, they are often overqualified for the jobs they are offered, which typically pay a lower salary as well. As unemployment benefits are calculated as a percentage of an individual's previous salary, unemployed people risk falling into poverty.

The AMS has undertaken a new initiative to support those who are long-term unemployed 'Aktion 20,000'²⁸. The aim is to create 20,000 jobs across Austria in sectors experiencing a labour shortage, for people aged over 50 and unemployed for over one year. However, the OBDS states that the opportunities offered as part of this initiative tend to be low-paid or voluntary, instead of good quality jobs.

Regional differences in employment persist, with an east/west divide. The OBDS explains that the problem is becoming more difficult in east Austria, especially Vienna, as the area attracts more refugees, asylum-seekers and other migrants. This is demonstrated by the fact that the number of people without Austrian citizenship is 15% nationally, but 28.6% in Vienna. Lower skill levels among migrants and prejudices from employers hinder their labour market integration, an important reason why unemployment levels remain higher in this part of the country.

²⁷Dimmel, N. (2016) The good welfare state. Linz

²⁸Ministry of Social Affairs (2017) Aktion 20,000 https://www.sozialministerium.at/site/Arbeit_Behinderung/Arbeitsmarkt/Arbeitsmarktpolitik/Aeltere_ArbeitnehmerInnen/Aktion_20.000 (last accessed 01/11/17)

Belgium

Disadvantaged people are unable to break the cycle of poverty, and social services lack the capacity to support them. In 2017, Belgian social services identified increasing levels of child poverty, and at-risk of poverty rates for young people, migrants and people with disabilities²⁹. The Belgian contributors³⁰ cite the rising cost of living, in addition to insufficient welfare benefits and an insufficient minimum wage as reasons for this increase.

Local social services take an integrated approach to respond to chronic poverty. They provide personalised training, debt support, help finding affordable housing and access to services like health and childcare. Some of these services are compulsory (debt support and basic financial assistance) whilst others are not, but are provided as part of an integrated approach: e.g. the provision of housing services. However, the extent of this support varies according to the financial capacities and political priorities of the specific local authority. Especially in the regions and cities with the highest rates of poverty, social services lack sufficient means to employ enough social workers to provide adequate support.

House prices have risen sharply, representing a larger proportion of people's disposable income and becoming an important factor in rising poverty levels. Social services devote a large amount of their time to supporting people in finding good quality and affordable housing, which is the first step in the provision of social services. At local level, a number of projects have emerged to complement the support offered by social services, through the help of volunteers.

Negative incentive policies to boost employment are ineffective; more focus is needed on support provided by social services. Negative incentives to promote employment, such as restrictions on eligibility to unemployment benefits, are having a damaging effect at local level, with more pressure placed on social services. These policies have been particularly detrimental to young people, and often social services lose contact with them.

Meanwhile, social services have fewer resources to improve opportunities for vulnerable people. The Association of Flemish Directors of Social Services (VVOS) states that the situation for some vulnerable people is particularly worrying, and believes that many long-term unemployed people are unlikely to ever acquire the competences required to enter the labour market.

Initiatives are underway to address disparities in employment between regions. Following measures in the 6th State Reform (2012-2014), labour market activation became a competence of Belgian regions. The impact of this reform has not been evaluated yet, hence any progress made to reduce differences in unemployment levels between Belgian regions is still unknown.

SYNERJOB is one practice which may help to reduce regional differences in unemployment. Regional Public Employment Services cooperate with each other to promote interregional mobility in Belgium through SYNERJOB, a federation of Public Employment and Vocational Training Services created in 2007. SYNERJOB connects the five Regional Public Employment Services, disseminating job offers, training and language courses throughout the country.

²⁹Flemish Government Study Service (2017) Flemish Poverty Monitor <http://regionalestatistieken.vlaanderen.be/sites/default/files/atoms/files/vlaamse-armoedemonitor-2017.pdf> (last accessed 01/11/17)

³⁰Joint contribution from PPS Social Integration and Association of Flemish Directors of Social Services (VVOS)

Coordination between different government levels is complex, and growing demand for services is only partly met by extra funding.

Competences delegated to the different government levels (federal, regional and local), make cooperation difficult, for example employment services are a regional competence whilst social services are a local competence. However, to address this situation, in Ghent, an agreement between the Flemish public employment service (VDAB) and the local OCMW (Public Centre for Social Welfare) aims to improve support for service users by sharing information on mutual users.

Changes to the organisation of social services may impact the priority given to social issues.

The Flemish Government has taken the decision to integrate the Public Centres of Social Welfare into local authorities. However, VVOS warns of the risk that adequate financing of social services might be lost through this process.

A rise in funding for local social services has enabled most local social services to employ more staff to support an increased number of service users. However, these extra funds are insufficient to support the additional staff required and address the increase in social assistance beneficiaries, leading to social services shouldering a significant part of rising costs. The poorest local social services have therefore been less capable of meeting increasing demands.

Migrants require more support to develop their skills to overcome poverty and unemployment.

Immigrants make up one fifth of the Belgian working age population, but the employment rates of non-EU immigrants are very low. An increase in precarious jobs and lower wages means immigrants are heavily exposed to poverty. This situation is linked to low educational attainment, vulnerability to disincentives to work and poor knowledge of Belgium's languages, compounded by discrimination³¹. The OECD recommends that immigrants are provided with more support to develop their skills, whilst employers are given stronger incentives to hire a more diverse workforce³². Furthermore, the OECD states that economic reforms to reduce labour costs and increase work incentives for low-skilled workers would improve the situation of immigrants.

Fighting discrimination is largely the responsibility of local government and UNIA, an independent public body set-up to improve equal opportunities. Some local social services try to lead by example by employing a diverse workforce, however much more is required to truly address discrimination against immigrants.

Maintaining current levels of service provision and deinstitutionalising care is a challenge for social services. VVOS states that maintaining service provision to an increasing number of people with greater complexity of needs, will be a serious challenge, especially in the wider context of an ageing population and greater focus on deinstitutionalisation. There has been a clear shift towards the deinstitutionalisation of care, with greater focus on community care and personal budgets. Despite the opportunities that this presents, the contributor from VVOS warns that there is a risk that in the deinstitutionalisation process some vulnerable people will suffer greater exclusion as they do not have the ability to live independently and community services

³¹OECD 2015 Economic Survey of Belgium

³²Ibid

Bulgaria

Long-term unemployment remains high.

Although there has been an overall decrease in the unemployment rate³³, long-term unemployment rates remain very high, especially in the north-western region where 76.5% of the unemployed are long-term unemployed. According to the National Statistical Institute (NSI), 53.3% of people living in poverty are long-term unemployed, hence special measures should be taken for their training and inclusion in the labour market, especially addressing the situation of the Roma. Since 57.9% of unemployed people only have primary education or no education at all, specific programmes co-funded by the EU have been implemented to prevent early school leaving and improve professional training.

The Centres for Employment and Social Assistance created in 2015 have succeeded in guaranteeing tailored support for long-term unemployed people. Cooperation between social services and employment services was enhanced by the establishment of joint teams of experts from employment and social services agencies. The teams have been trained on needs assessments, and have been able to assist different groups of vulnerable people, such as single mothers or people with disabilities. This pilot project proved to be successful and has been extended in 2017 to long-term unemployed people in remote regions of the country.

While progress has been made on policies addressing children and families at risk, older people and the long-term unemployed still experience high levels of poverty. NSI data for 2016 shows that 60% of people aged over 65 have an income below the poverty line, which was set at €165³⁴ per month in 2016. The main reason for the high levels of poverty amongst older people seems to be the low level of pensions. On top of their pensions, older people are also eligible for social benefits depending on their specific needs. These benefits are based on

the guaranteed minimum income which is around €33³⁵ per month. Though an increase in pensions is foreseen in 2017, experts argue that better support could be provided through an increase of social benefits, which have not changed since 2009 and should increase based on current living costs.

The Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) has provided important support for older people through the delivery of hot meals and food packages. Due to the demographic crisis and young people's migration to urban areas, many older people now live alone in remote parts of the country, especially in rural areas. National programmes support municipalities to provide home services for older people. As a result, nearly 20,000 social assistants have been trained and employed in the last few years. The European Social Fund (ESF) has been key in training the new social assistant workforce.

New reforms are also under discussion concerning disability benefits. Until now, disability benefits and older people's pensions were paid through social security. The high number of people with disabilities is putting the system under pressure and for this reason a draft legislative proposal addresses the idea of creating a specific budget for disability benefits separate from social security. Moreover, the reform aims to introduce the employability assessment of people with disabilities to integrate them in the labour market depending on their level of disability. With this reform, people with disabilities will not only receive benefits but will also be assisted to find employment.

³³According to the National Statistical Institute (NSI), the unemployment rate reached a record low of 7.1% at the end of 2016 and the downward trend continues in 2017. The unemployment rate in March 2017 decreased to 6.9%.

³⁴322.70 Bulgarian Lev

³⁵64.54 Bulgarian Lev

Housing for vulnerable groups is a key challenge.

During the EU 2014-2020 programming period, special funding is provided by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) for housing projects in 66 municipalities. Twenty per cent of the funding should be devoted to social housing. These projects are based on the integration of different services in urban and social planning. After a specific assessment of the population's needs, municipalities distribute funding accordingly. Smaller towns and villages usually focus on the refurbishment of existing buildings and facilities. These municipalities can apply for financial support both from the national budget and the ERDF.

EU funds will support an ambitious project which aims to accelerate the deinstitutionalisation (DI) process for adults and older people with long-term care (LTC) needs. The DI process for adults is progressing, following the successful implementation of the DI programme for children. EU funds will contribute positively to the implementation of these new services through the EU Regions in Growth Operational Programme, once the map of services is ready. The project will also focus on the integration of health and social services in LTC for older people at home. The idea is to pilot these new services with EU funding and then include them in the legislation for social services with clear requirements and financial standards. On the other hand, community-based services for the rehabilitation and support of people with disabilities have also been developed, but there is a notable lack of disability-friendly structures and coordinated services.

New social services legislation will address major gaps in the integration of services.

Expert groups are working on the integration of services and some legislative drafts have been discussed. These drafts focus on the integration of social and health services for older people and on the integration of social, health and education services for children. With a more stable political majority in the country, changes in the legislation are likely to be adopted. The foreseen Social Services Regulation will include clear requirements for new integrated services and financial standards for existing social services.

Czech Republic

National at risk of poverty figures mask increasing deprivation in some regions according to the Czech Association of Social Care Providers (APSS ČR). The regions of Karlovy Vary, Ústí nad Labem and Moravia – Silesia in particular have suffered from the loss of industry, such as coal mining and steel production, which used to support many local communities. These regions are characterised by few employment opportunities and low educational qualifications of their residents. A recent report found that the number of socially excluded localities has more than tripled in the Karlovy Vary and Moravian-Silesian regions since 2006³⁶.

The financing of social services remains inconsistent across Czech regions. The rules on financing vary from region to region, for example the Hradec Kralove and Ústí nad Labem regions have funding arrangements with the national government to cover a three-year period; other regions only have funding agreed on a one-year basis. Regions of Central Bohemia, Hradec Kralove Region and Zlín Region allow for a reasonable profit for service providers, whilst other regions do not allow for profit when providing services.

Furthermore, the regions do not follow standards set by the government in the implementation of funds distributed from the national level. Personnel costs for social services should be based on an allowance of €1,610 to €1,910 per month³⁷ for each social worker, comprising a significant proportion of total funding distributed from the state. However, the regions use different standards. The Karlovy Vary Region uses €1,450³⁸ and the Středočeský Region €2,680³⁹. This unnecessarily restricts the capacity of social services in some regions.

The new amendment to the Act on Social Services promises the establishment of more uniform financing rules. However, it is unclear if when the amendment will be approved in light of the autumn parliamentary elections.

A growing problem for Czech social services is the issue of recruiting and retaining trained staff. The root cause of this is the insufficient remuneration of staff in social services, for instance a carer in an entry-level position may only earn €580 to 610 per month⁴⁰.

Some progress has been made in the provision of childcare, but reforms in education are ineffective.

The 2016 reform to improve the inclusiveness of education⁴¹ has been criticised by the Association of Special Education Teachers who claim that it has failed to meet expectations. Schools are missing teaching assistants and much needed funds to be able to teach children with special needs⁴².

Building on its success, the 'micro-nurseries' project has been expanded. Micro-nurseries are not-for-profit childcare groups based on the Austrian 'Kindergruppe' model, caring for up to 24 children, with financing provided by the ESF. Interest in the scheme has greatly increased, and now 72 micro-nurseries are being supported across the Czech Republic. The challenge will be to further extend this success to kindergartens which account for the majority of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services in the country. However, there is still the need to change mindsets as childcare has traditionally been seen as the responsibility of mothers at home, and municipalities do not often prioritise the expansion of kindergarten facilities.

³⁶GAC spol. s r. o. (2015) Analysis of Socially Excluded Localities in the Czech Republic. <https://www.esfcr.cz/07-13/oplzz/analiza-socialne-vyloucenych-lokalit-v-cr-1> (last accessed 24 July)

³⁷42,000 to 50,000 CZK

³⁸38,000 CZK

³⁹70,000 CZK

⁴⁰15,000 to 16,000 CZK

⁴¹Amendment to the Education Act, 1 September 2016. The reform guarantees support to all children with disabilities or special educational needs so they can attend mainstream schools.

⁴²Association of Special Education Teachers (2016) Declaration on the amended Education Act. <http://www.protext.cz/zprava.php?id=26607> (last accessed 01/11/17)

Progress is being made regarding the participation of persons with disabilities in the labour market.

Persons with disabilities, accounting for 7% of all jobseekers in 2016, were prioritised in employment policy in 2016. Recruitment of rehabilitation consultants and employment coordinators for persons with disabilities has been enhanced. Moreover, €187 million⁴³ was spent in 2016 in supporting 37,000 persons with disabilities to find sheltered employment, whilst another 8,041 were supported in finding employment in the open labour market⁴⁴.

More action on the deinstitutionalisation process of mental health services is needed.

There are large institutional hospitals for people with mental health problems in every Czech county, and the Czech Republic is rated among the worst countries in Europe for the provision of community care in mental health⁴⁵. Changes are planned through a reform of psychiatric care, which will restructure the system from large institutions to community-based services. However, it has been in preparation since 2013 and its implementation appears distant.

Deinstitutionalisation of childcare is increasing despite problems in the system.

In 2016, 10,992 children were placed in foster care, 500 more children than in 2015. Meanwhile, the number of children placed in institutional care in 2016 fell by 39 against the previous year. However, the APSS ČR states that the fragmentation of the service between three ministries, the continued operation of high-capacity residential facilities for children and the absence of regulations for the placement of pre-school children in collective care remain significant problems. The APSS ČR recommends unifying children's services under one ministry, introducing legislation to strengthen the transition from residential care facilities to community-based care, improving the regional availability of children's services and diverting funds from institutional care to preventative services for families and children.

Housing exclusion is a growing problem but the government Act on Social Housing, an important piece of legislation for tackling this, is significantly delayed. However, social services are developing their own housing programmes using European Structural Funds. For example, the three-step model developed by the Government Agency for Social Inclusion is being increasingly adopted in many Czech cities⁴⁶. It involves a structured approach in the support of people who have lost their homes.

⁴³4.9 billion CZK

⁴⁴Government Committee for Disabled Citizens (2016) Implementation of the national plan for promoting equal opportunities for persons with disabilities. <https://goo.gl/FxaotF> (last accessed 01/11/17)

⁴⁵Cyril Höschl, Director of the National Institute of Mental Health (2017) Meeting of representatives of the Ministry of Health with representatives of psychiatric health facilities <https://goo.gl/e8NhMw> (last accessed 01/11/17)

⁴⁶The three-step model is a process which begins by first housing clients in temporary accommodation, then in 'training housing' where they are provided targeted support and finally they are helped in finding long-term housing.

Denmark

The initial impact of the benefits ceiling is mixed and more time is needed to make a full evaluation.

The requirement of working 225 hours per year to obtain full benefit entitlements (part of the benefits ceiling policy) has increased stress for people who are unemployed and have complex problems. Despite this, employment services indicate that it has had a positive impact in supporting people's first steps to independence when their sole problem is unemployment, through micro jobs and improved motivation.

A lack of affordable housing represents a serious problem for young people and those receiving benefits.

People on benefits are particularly vulnerable, as the new benefits ceiling restricts funding for rent subsidies. After the introduction of the ceiling, 34,094 people had experienced reductions in their rent subsidies by February 2017⁴⁷. Young people are also particularly affected. In 2009, 633 people aged 18 to 24 were recorded as homeless nationally; by 2015, this figure almost doubled, reaching 1,172⁴⁸.

When supporting homeless people, the Housing First strategy is a method which has shown considerable success in Denmark. The strategy places the provision of housing as the first stage of support to foster people's independence and social inclusion. An evaluation shows that 90% of 1,500 participants in the strategy manage to retain their housing after 6 months, and most report an increased quality of life⁴⁹. A new phase of the Housing First strategy is running from 2016 to 2019, with the participation of 25 municipalities.

However, given the increasingly severe lack of affordable housing, the Association of Social Directors (FSD), suggests that the government should co-finance housing development projects to lead to more affordable rental properties.

The integrated approach in the provision of social and employment services has shown success.

For example, from 2014 to 2016, ten municipalities implemented a holistic approach in their work with families with unemployed parents and children with active child protection cases. Interdisciplinary teams incorporated both a family and employment dimension when making assessments and action plans. An evaluation found that these action plans had led to positive results for the families, and the model is now being implemented in other municipalities⁵⁰.

However, FSD warns that an employment focus should not dominate in integrated strategies. For the most vulnerable, procedures such as work assessments risk creating additional stress. Despite progress towards an integrated approach to employment and social needs, cooperation with NGOs is weak. Traditionally municipalities have taken a leading role in social services, but NGOs often provide important support to marginalised groups and cooperation with them must be reinforced.

Reforms put at risk the financial security of people with disabilities, but their labour market integration has improved.

In 2013, an Employment and Social Assistance Reform restricted social assistance eligibility for people with disabilities. Organisations representing people with disabilities⁵¹ expressed concerns that the tightened eligibility criteria could lead to financial insecurity for a large group of people with disabilities. The reform also widened the scope for being able to work reduced hours in a 'fleksjob'⁵², which appears to have reduced the number of people with disabilities reliant on social assistance, as illustrated by table 3.

⁴⁷Office of Employment and Recruitment (2017) Analysis of changes in benefits recipients. <https://goo.gl/vC37ZB> (last accessed 01/11/17)

⁴⁸Benjaminsen og Christensen (2015) Homelessness in Denmark 2015. http://hjemtilalle.dk/media/sfi_rapport_2015.pdf (last accessed 01/11/17)

⁴⁹SFI National Research centre for welfare (2017) Evaluation of Housing First <https://www.sfi.dk/publikationer/housing-first-i-danmark-12839/> (last accessed 01/11/17)

⁵⁰Deloitte (2016) Support for Vulnerable families <https://goo.gl/BuVZQc> (last accessed 01/11/17)

⁵¹Danske Handicaporganisationer <http://www.handicap.dk/politik/politikatalog/fleksjob/> and Landsforeningen LEV <http://www.lev.dk/temaer/foertidspension> (last accessed 01/11/17)

⁵²An ordinary job with reduced hours and adaptations if necessary for a person with disabilities

Table 3. fleksjob participation⁵³

Year	People with disabilities receiving social assistance	Number of people in a fleksjob
2013	232,715	61,293
2014	223,495	65,060
2015	215,637	68,858
2016	208,583	72,465

Social services have also carried out more activities to develop personal skills for people with disabilities. This reflects wider interdisciplinary approaches, with support emphasising job-orientated goals, such as the development of social skills, dealing with anxiety and strengthening self-esteem. However, FSD believes employers must be more accommodating for people with specific needs. More tolerable and flexible workplaces are needed for people with disabilities and to respond to the growing number of people diagnosed with mental health problems. Unfortunately, social workers often find employers reluctant to employ people with learning disabilities.

Initiatives are underway to improve the employment rate of young people. Young people under 30 years old in Denmark are required to be in some form of education if they are recipients of unemployment benefits. A new government initiative aims to improve their education by replacing existing public youth education courses with a basic two-year educational course. This course will be run by municipalities and will include academic education, vocational training and career guidance. Accompanying this, social services will be following a more integrated approach in their work with young people, reinforcing coordination with schools and public employment services. A drive to encourage employers to establish more internships has been successful in boosting youth employment. As a result, more young people have been able to gain professional experience, an important step in supporting their integration into the labour market.

Cuts in the level of social assistance provided for refugees and asylum seekers has made their situation more precarious. Cuts to refugee's social assistance, included in the 2016 Asylum Package, have created a significant financial barrier for refugees attempting to make the transition from temporary to permanent housing. As a result, many remain in temporary accommodation. In response to the cuts, social services aim to support refugees' quick integration into the labour market. This includes measures such as increased cooperation with employers, ensuring that training⁵⁴ matches the requirements of local labour markets, coordination between family and employment services to empower migrant women, focussing language training on work-related vocabulary, the inclusion of language training at work, and more cooperation with volunteers and NGOs service providers.

FSD praises the ten social mobility goals⁵⁵ as a positive initiative, but suggests they could be improved. Clearer explanation on how some of the goals can be measured is needed, whilst qualitative considerations such as wellbeing and quality of life risk being overlooked. FSD suggests other perspectives could be added to the goals, namely children's health, child poverty and mental health. In addition, FSD argues that the goals should recognise the importance of the stability and continuity of interventions by social services as well as their effectiveness.

⁵³Fleksjob participation data. Source: Jobindsats.dk

⁵⁴Training includes targeted language courses, and 'basic integration education' (IGU) consisting of individually planned programmes combining educational training and work placements

⁵⁵The Danish government introduced the ten social mobility goals to support people with disabilities, homeless people, people addicted to alcohol or drugs, and other vulnerable people

Finland

Finland is about to start a long-awaited reform of health and social care services.⁵⁶ Following the initial discussion in the Parliament, the proposal is being redrafted by the Government with the objective to secure adequate delivery and access to health and social services while keeping costs under control. The whole package should be concluded in Parliament by spring 2018 and the responsibility for health and social services will shift from the municipalities to 18 counties as of 2020.

The law proposal on freedom of choice was submitted to Parliament in May 2017⁵⁷. Freedom of choice means that clients have the right to choose providers of health and social services. This reform aims to strengthen users' position and rights as well as to improve the health and social service system. The proposed model of freedom of choice will increase the number of service providers. However, to reach these objectives, the new model needs to be well-designed and planned. During the consultation process, the proposal received strong criticism from, among others, the Evaluation Board of Legislation, due to the lack of a rigorous impact assessment of the proposal.

Five freedom of choice pilot projects will support the implementation of the Act even before it enters into force⁵⁸. These pilots will provide information about the main reasons why users choose actively a certain service, the incentives of compensation models for companies and the level of compensation in relation to the needs of users. Social services are also included in the pilots, because counselling for social work professionals is part of the services provided by social and health care centres. The government has allocated over €100 million to start new pilots and the Freedom of Choice Act is due to come into force in stages between 2020 and 2023.

Another key pilot project that is being implemented relates to citizen engagement and participation into the development of health and social services. Pilots are conducted in five regions to develop a model to have citizens' voice heard in policy-making. The aim of the project is to develop services based on people's needs.

Long-term care is one of the major challenges in Finland due to rapid demographic changes.

The ageing of society during the last 10 years has meant that institutions have been replaced by housing services, and home care and community care have been extended. In many regions, over 10% of the population over 75 requires long-term care. To prevent the risk of long-term care for older people, regions have developed many-fold rehabilitation programmes. Moreover, different solutions have been developed to avoid loneliness and increase safety at home. Also, technical solutions such as mobile applications have emerged to allow care workers to be more efficient. Finally, family carers are being supported through financial support as well as leave-days and support services.

Employment rates in Finland have started to increase and unemployment rates to decrease.

Finnish unemployment rate fell to 8.9% in June 2017 from 9.3% in June 2016⁵⁹. Long-term unemployment, however, increased by 13% and very long-term unemployment by 18%. Therefore, one of the major challenges is to promote job creation and the integration in the labour market of the most vulnerable.

⁵⁶Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (2017) Health, social services and regional government reform to enter into force on 1 January 2020, county elections in October 2018. <http://alueuudistus.fi/en/frontpage> (last accessed 29/08/2017)

⁵⁷Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (2017) Government proposes to increase freedom of choice in health and social services. http://alueuudistus.fi/en/artikkeli/-/asset_publisher/1271139/hallitus-esittaa-laajaa-valinnanvapautta-sosiaali-ja-terveyspalveluihin (last accessed 30/08/2017)

⁵⁸Government proposes to increase freedom of choice in health and social services. Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (2017). http://stm.fi/en/article/-/asset_publisher/hallitus-esittaa-laajaa-valinnanvapautta-sosiaali-ja-terveyspalveluihin (last accessed 05/09/2017)

⁵⁹Finland unemployment rate (2017) <https://tradingeconomics.com/finland/unemployment-rate> (last accessed 30/08/2017)

Services for the long-term unemployed will fall under the responsibility of the new counties from 2019. According to government plans, these services will be provided by companies instead of the public sector. However, taking into consideration that the long-term unemployed need a wide range of services, the association of directors of social services highlights that cooperation with the regional level is crucial. NGOs are currently playing a major role in service provision and have expressed concerns regarding the future of services for unemployed people in a market-oriented environment.

Employment outcomes are hampered by disincentives to work. In some cases, moving into a paid job is not sufficiently attractive, especially for single parents, due to the loss of social assistance and housing benefits. Narrowing eligibility for some benefits, strengthening conditionality or increasing sanctions in case of non-compliance with activation requirements are some of the measures proposed by the government. However, negative incentives have been criticised widely by the political opposition and NGOs working with unemployed people.

A basic income pilot has been running since January 2017. In order to get information about individuals' responses to changes in the benefits system, 2,000 unemployed people are receiving €560 per month. This pilot project could help design a possible future reform of the social security system. According to the association of social services directors in Finland, the pilot project is being successful because the government has conducted a good impact assessment before its implementation. Moreover, selecting a limited number of persons to test the income pilot has made possible to avoid unintended effects or unexpected costs.

Youth unemployment and the number of young people not in employment, education or training declined in 2016. The aim of the youth guarantee is to bring targeted cross-cutting services under the same roof and to provide through service units a single service point for young people so that they receive advice, guidance and support in matters of education, employment and welfare. The service units are a common effort to coordinate services between the Ministry of Employment and the Economy, the Ministry of Education and Culture, as well as the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health.

Mental health disorders amongst young adults have increased in the last years. The number of people receiving allowances due to mental illness increased from 11.4% in 2005 to 14.7% in 2015. Mental health services need to improve structural efficiency and move from scattered services to more coordinated care. Moreover, the number of care professionals needs to be increased in order to avoid delays and improve the quality of care.

In 2016, an action programme on the integration of migrants was launched. Finland received over 30,000 asylum-seekers in 2015 and about 30% of them got a permit to remain in the country⁶⁰. Municipalities handle the arrival of asylum seekers in different ways. Some rural municipalities have succeeded to integrate migrants more easily due to the existence of a significant industrial structure with high demand of blue collar professionals. All municipalities have prepared an integration plan to assess and monitor their employment and training opportunities, wellbeing and health as well as the social participation of migrant young people.

⁶⁰First residence permits issued by the Finnish Immigration Service and persons who acquired Finnish citizenship in 2015. Available at: http://www.migri.fi/download/65019_Tilastograafi_2015_EN_final.pdf?ddef4aa0d380d488 (last accessed 30/08/2017)

France

Social services are struggling to support the most vulnerable such as the long-term unemployed, non-EU-migrants and low-skilled young people. Indeed, in 2016 the unemployment rate remained higher than in the EU (8.6%) and long-term unemployment is still rising in contrast to the EU trend. Moreover, the employment situation of the non-EU-born is deteriorating and the labour market inclusion of the second generation of migrants remains challenging.

The employment rate of the non-EU-born residing in France decreased from 55.4% in 2014 to 54.9% in 2015. Moreover, this group is still facing acute problems because of their long-lasting poverty and unemployment rates. As pointed out by ANDASS, the national association of social services directors, some people have been out of the job market for so long that they cannot picture themselves returning to work and sometimes do not accept job opportunities. As a result, France is now facing a paradoxical combination of manpower shortage and high unemployment.

The responses of local county councils (*'départements'*) have been diverse but most of them have targeted active labour market policy tools to those with good prospects of employment. Social services are increasingly facing difficulties to reach those with more difficulties to be employed, who are essentially being given a minimum income allowance (RSA) with little alternative prospects. At the same time, social services budgets are decreasing relatively to the number of beneficiaries. Total net spending increased by 1.3% in 2016, after increasing by 3% in previous years. Given the constant increase in direct cash payments, social service budgets are slightly decreasing⁶¹.

The unemployment rate for low-skilled young people has kept stable at 40% or decreased marginally despite increased active labour market policy measures. According to ANDASS, active labour market policies are globally ineffective in reducing unemployment. This is the case in France where those policies mostly imply public sector subsidised jobs, which are not effective in terms of bringing people into competitive employment⁶².

There are large performance gaps between schools in France. Indeed, school composition often reflects the residential concentration of people with socioeconomic difficulties and migrant backgrounds. The classical response of the French government to address this situation is to increase the time of teachers at school as well as the number of experienced teachers working in the poorest neighbourhoods. ANDASS considers that there is a positive link between both the ratio of teachers per number of students and their level of expertise with better education quality in neighbourhoods facing socio-economic difficulties. In addition, ESN contributor considers key the experimentation and development of new approaches such as cognitive-behavioural therapies targeted to teenage early school leavers as well as early stage language acquisition training targeted to 1 to 3-year-old children.

The Commission highlights that France has performed better than other EU countries when it comes to addressing poverty, social exclusion and inequality. However, some vulnerable groups such as unemployed people and part-time workers are in a more vulnerable situation than full-time workers.

⁶¹National Observatory for Social Action (ODAS) (2017) Annual survey: departmental spending on social work in 2016 <http://odas.net/Resultats-de-l-enquete-annuelle-sur-les-depenses> last accessed (01/09/2017)

⁶²Isabelle Benoteau (2015) What is the impact of publicly subsidised employment on career development? <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/1378067?sommaire=1378070> (last accessed 01/09/2017)

The poverty rate among unemployed people increased in 2015 (from 31.4% in 2014 to 37.2% in 2015). The increasing proportion of part-time workers, particularly those who earn around the minimum wage, has translated into an increased risk of in-work poverty since 2010 (from 6.5% in 2010 to 7.5% in 2015). Although it remains below the EU average, the in-work poverty risk remains higher for part-time workers (13.2% in 2015)⁶³ than for those in full time employment.

France's performance is relatively good in addressing revenue inequalities, but not in addressing asset inequalities. Asset inequalities are at their post-war highest point and keep increasing, especially due to large inequalities in real estate ownership. As a result, the revenue of low income households is increasingly captured by the real estate rent. This phenomenon mitigates France's good results in addressing poverty and inequalities.

Moreover, social exclusion, in particular social isolation, seems to be an increasing phenomenon. Some people are simply dropping out of the system and no longer appear on the radar of social services, especially in rural areas. This phenomenon is reported by social work teams, but is not completely covered by official statistics. The fact that 20 to 30% of those who are eligible for inclusion income support do not take up this benefit confirms that the system fails to reach those at risk of social exclusion.

A study by the National Fund for Family Allowances⁶⁴ showed that one quarter of those who are eligible for the active solidarity income⁶⁵, do not apply for it because they do not want to rely on social assistance⁶⁶. Others mention primarily the complexity of the procedure or the lack of information about their eligibility.

Access to affordable housing for those on low income remains a challenge. There is a critical shortage of affordable housing, including social housing, in particular in growing urban areas. Last year, ANDASS recommended that public policies were targeted to the supply side, in particular by making more land available for construction. This request has been integrated in the programme of the new president. In addition, ANDASS supports capping rents in dense areas where no land is available. This measure is an effective way to fight inequalities through the redistribution of unproductive real estate rent.

Launched in 2014, the programme 'Réponse accompagnée pour tous' aims to promote a community-based approach in working with people with multiple needs. This programme consists of a multi-institutional approach aimed at providing support for all people with disabilities. In 2015, 23 local authorities volunteered as pioneers to implement it, and in 2017 66 other local authorities joined the project. The Caisse Nationale de Solidarité pour l'autonomie (CNSA) is responsible for the implementation of this programme at the national level. The implementation of this new approach will help to determine more accurately the care needs of people with disabilities.

Territorial disparity also exists with regards to foster care and institutional care for children. Last year, ANDASS called for the creation of a national child protection strategy to address this territorial disparity but, unfortunately, no progress has been made. According to ANDASS, the national government is also struggling to implement a wide data collection project on child protection, which requires significant resources.

⁶³European Commission (2017) France Country report. https://ec.europa.eu/info/files/2017-european-semester-country-report-france_en (last accessed 01/09/2017)

⁶⁴Caisse nationale des Allocations familiales (CAF).

⁶⁵Revenu de solidarité active (RSA) [in-work welfare benefit aiming to ease the return to work]

⁶⁶Les non-recourants au RSA (2012). https://www.caf.fr/sites/default/files/cnaf/Documents/Dser/essentiel/124_essentiel_-_non-recours_rsa.pdf (last accessed 01/09/2017)

Germany

Though the German economy is performing well, some groups such as single parents or migrants are still disproportionately affected by poverty. As the European Commission country report highlights, labour market integration of the long-term unemployed remains a social challenge⁶⁷. In 2012, a labour market policy reform⁶⁸ came into force to build an easier and more transparent set of integration tools for unemployed people that would be flexibly deployable at the local level. In 2014, despite the positive labour market developments and this reform, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs reported a constant level of long-term unemployment. Therefore, a new concept for the integration of the long-term unemployed was initiated⁶⁹, focusing on individual employment barriers. Activation centres have been established to work in collaboration with local social services, such as debt or drug counselling advice.

The unemployment rate of people with disabilities is still twice as high as the rate for people without disabilities (6,4%)⁷⁰. Indeed, whereas the public sector mostly fulfils the legal obligation to employ at least 5% of persons with disabilities, the private sector does not respect it⁷¹. The ongoing increase of people with disabilities being placed in sheltered workshops⁷², which had been initially created for people with severe limitations in their employment ability, has led to a public debate about the controversial use of sheltered workshops and their future. As it was already mentioned on ESN's 2016 report, the overuse of

sheltered workshops has also evoked strong criticism from the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which recommended "phasing out sheltered workshops through immediately enforceable exit strategies, timelines and incentives for public and private employment in the mainstream labour market"⁷³.

Insufficient language skills and lack of formal vocational qualifications are major challenges for refugees' labour market integration. A key challenge for social services supporting the labour market integration of recently arrived migrants is the coordination between stakeholders involved in the process, including facility managers, security services, social workers and other professionals working in refugee facilities. Moreover, a mere focus on asylum seekers with good prospects as well as the growing number of people with rejected asylum applications remaining in Germany hamper early social services interventions to support integration. Integration management at local level has the potential to improve access to regular social services as well as reducing service gaps and parallel structures. However, to make local social services available, the development of appropriate information, consultation and assistance for recently arrived migrants, regardless of their migration status, is crucial.

⁶⁷European Commission (2017) Germany Country Report Germany. <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/2017-european-semester-country-report-germany-en.pdf> (last accessed 05/09/2017)

⁶⁸Federal Government: Law to Improve Integration Opportunities in the Labour Market. <http://dipbt.bundestag.de/extrakt/ba/WP17/361/36161.html> (last accessed 15/8/2017)

⁶⁹Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (2014) Opening up opportunities - securing social participation and reducing long-term unemployment. http://www.bmas.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/PDF-Meldungen/konzeptpapier-chancen-oeffnen-teilhabe-sichern.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=2 (last accessed on 06/08/2017)

⁷⁰Aktion Mensch: Inklusionsbarometer Arbeit (2016) <https://www.aktion-mensch.de/themen-informieren-und-diskutieren/arbeit/zahlen-und-fakten.html/> (last accessed on 01/09/2017)

⁷¹Federal Employment Agency (2017) Situation of people with severe disabilities. <https://statistik.arbeitsagentur.de/Statischer-Content/Arbeitsmarktberichte/Personengruppen/generische-Publikationen/Brosch-Die-Arbeitsmarktsituation-schwerbehinderter-Menschen-2016.pdf> (last accessed 01/06/2017)

⁷²There were up to 300,000 persons in 2016 placed under sheltered workshops.

⁷³UN-Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2015) Concluding observations on the initial report of Germany. http://www.institut-fuer-menschenrechte.de/fileadmin/user_upload/PDF-Dateien/Pakte_Konventionen/CRPD_behindertenrechtskonvention/crpd_state_report_germany_1_2011_ConObs_2015_en.pdf (last accessed 01/09/2017)

The European Commission's country report points to weaknesses in the German family benefits and childcare system.

The German family benefits system is mostly linked to either taxation or part-time employment. This is especially the case in terms of tax-free child allowance and parental allowance. It is key to highlight the fact that nearly half of the overall employment contracts in Germany are part-time contracts and women are holding most of them. In addition, official federal statistics show that the unadjusted gender pay gap in Germany in 2016 was 21%. This situation leads women rather than men to stay at home to care for their relatives. Data from 2015 show that women represent a share of 85% of all single parent households⁷⁴, and they are more affected by long-term unemployment than men. Therefore, the link between childcare, female employment and child poverty is clear, and action is needed at federal level to address the gender pay gap and the income situation of households affected by long-term unemployment.

The level of child poverty is particularly alarming.

In 2015, 14.7% of children grew up in families that lived on basic income, 0.4% more than in 2011. With the objective of ensuring the social and cultural participation of all children, the German government approved in 2011 the education and participation package⁷⁵.

However, evaluations show that some families do not make use of this programme due to bureaucratic barriers and stigmatisation. To overcome these issues, a standard procedure to get support should be introduced based on scientific evidence.

There is an increased demand for health and social care services.

However, this sector is facing a shortage of skilled labour. To tackle this problem, the federal government plans to overhaul vocational training systems for health care and social care professions⁷⁶. Nursing jobs in the health care systems, in childcare and in care for older people used to be separate professional paths, with rather big differences in prestige and salaries. The federal government has recently launched some ideas to create an integrated care professional pathway that includes all areas of care work and a reform of vocational training. However, some critical voices argue that reforms do not tackle staff recruitment problems in the health and social care sectors for older people. There is also a lack of training schemes and training providers. To effectively address this lack of workforce, improvements need to be made in terms of salaries, working conditions and career opportunities. In addition, the health and social care services will face increasing funding challenges due to the ageing population.

⁷⁴German Federal Office of Statistics 2016.

⁷⁵Bildungs- und Teilhabepaket.

⁷⁶Gesetzesentwurf der Bundesregierung (03/9/2016): Entwurf eines Gesetzes zur Reform der Pflegeberufe. (Pflegeberufereformgesetz – PflBRefG). Available at <https://www.bmfsfj.de/blob/77270/a53f5a0dc4ef96b88a1acb8930538079/entwurf-pflegeberufsgesetz-data.pdf>, (last accessed 01/09/2017)

Hungary

The efficiency of the most important active labour market policy in Hungary is still not proven⁷⁷. The PWS employs 200,000 people, representing around 5% of the labour force. However, despite some recent improvement, the scheme has been criticised for its low efficiency in integrating people into the primary labour market, its poor targeting, and for the fact that it absorbs funds from other more efficient labour market tools⁷⁸.

Labour mobility is especially low in regions with extremely high rates of PWS participants, such as in Eastern and North-Eastern counties where it represents almost 20% of employment. Therefore, the government has taken the decision to gradually reduce spending on public works whilst at the same time increase the budget allocated to other active labour market policies.

Better employment rates are mainly due to the PWS and to young people leaving the country to find employment opportunities in other EU countries.

According to the Union of Social Professional Organisations (3sz), there is no evidence on the impact of EU funds on the employment of vulnerable people such as the long-term unemployed and young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs).

The adequacy and coverage of social assistance is limited and the 2015 social assistance reform still fails to guarantee uniform and minimally adequate living standards for those in need. According to 3sz, the essence of the reform was to move the competency for decisions on the eligibility for social benefits from the municipality to the district level. This shift had some minor positive effects on the poverty rate of those more in need but did not radically change social exclusion.

Roma poverty has decreased, but still remains high in a context where the adequacy and coverage of social assistance and unemployment benefits is still limited. The at-risk-of-poverty rate for Roma is almost five times higher than for non-Roma. According to 3sz, the social exclusion faced by Roma is due to structural factors as a result of lower levels of education, housing and urban settlement amongst the Roma compared to the national average.

Childcare coverage and quality has improved, but there are concerns about the child protection system. Indeed, in a context where the under- six age group of children is shrinking, the number of children under the age of three attending ECEC increased by 2% between 2015 and 2016.

However, 3sz is concerned about the lack of clear requirements on decisions to take children into care, and the length of time that children stay in foster care which may become a permanent measure rather than a temporary one.

The housing sector is still facing significant challenges. Severe housing deprivation is an important issue among the poorest in society. Moreover, the amount of social housing stock is very low, constituting only 3% of the total housing stock and is mainly available in larger cities. The problem is particularly serious in rural areas where the quality of housing and infrastructure is poor, with very low property values, no policies are in place to address this and there are no clear solutions.

⁷⁷European Commission (2017) Hungary Country Report. https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/2017-european-semester-country-reports_en (last accessed 01/11/2017)

⁷⁸Fruzsina Albert. (2017) Reforms to the Hungarian public works scheme: ESPN Flash Report 2017/42. <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=17911&langId=en>, (last accessed 25/08/2017)

Ireland

Housing is an increasingly severe problem in Ireland, demonstrated by rising homelessness.

According to the Irish contributors⁸⁶, there is an inadequate supply of public housing, a serious shortage of housing supply more generally, and an over-reliance on market mechanisms. In Dublin, between January and December 2016, 6,314 homeless adults accessed accommodation, 42% of whom were accessing accommodation for the first time⁸⁷. However, these figures do not capture the full extent of the homelessness crisis in Dublin as they do not include people who have taken other options. Nationally, homeless figures for March 2017 show that there are 4,909 adults accessing emergency accommodation, including 1,256 families⁸⁸.

The measures of the Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness appear to be improving the situation somewhat, but significant issues remain. The Irish contributors are concerned with the significant use of the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP), a rent subsidy scheme. Many argue that HAP can provide unstable and insecure tenancies⁸⁹. Measures curbing rent increases may also act as a disincentive for landlords, reducing supply. A group representing Irish landlords has criticised the government's measures and suggested that they will add to the difficulties of the private rental sector⁹⁰. Other, more lucrative options are seemingly more attractive to landlords, for example, estimates suggest that as many as five times more properties are available through Air B&B than through private renting⁹¹.

Steps are being taken to improve childcare availability and affordability, but they are hampered by poor implementation.

Pre-school children are entitled to the Early Childhood Care and Education scheme, which provides free access to childcare. The scheme has been extended from one year to two, and has good uptake. However, the introduction of the Affordable Child Care Scheme, which will provide childcare subsidies for low income families, has been delayed. The ICT and administrative arrangements are not in place for its implantation and will lead to 9,000 families missing out in the short term⁹². The Irish contributors recommend closer relationships and improved communications between governance structures to prevent these problems from reoccurring.

Persons with disabilities are twice as likely to experience poverty as the general population⁹³ and face significant barriers to inclusion in society.

Only about 30% of people with a disability in Ireland are in employment, whilst 35% of people with a disability have never been⁹⁴. The multiple disadvantages people with disabilities face in the labour market have been acknowledged by the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities launched in 2015. In addition, the Make Work Pay Interdepartmental Working Group⁹⁵ has recommended that people with disabilities should not lose benefits they are entitled to once they find employment, such as the medical card and free travel.

⁸⁶Terry Madden, independent consultant, Dr. Mairead Finn, independent consultant and Aideen McDonnell, senior mental health social worker

⁸⁷Dublin Region Homeless Executive (2016) Dublin Region Homeless Accommodation Use January to December 2016. <http://www.homelessdublin.ie/accommodation-usage>

⁸⁸Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government (2017) Homelessness Report March 2017 <http://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/homelessness/other/homelessness-data> (last accessed 01/11/2017)

⁸⁹Focus Ireland, Clúid Housing Association, Holland, K. (2017) Housing Assistance Payment Risks Homelessness-experts. <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/housing-assistance-payment-risks-homelessness-experts-1.3064028> (last accessed 01/11/2017)

⁹⁰Bardon, (2016) Landlords threaten to impose levies in response to 4% rent cap. <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/landlords-threaten-to-impose-levies-in-response-to-4-rent-cap-1.2909145> (last accessed 01/11/2017)

⁹¹Reddan, (2017) Six reasons for the rental crisis. <https://www.irishtimes.com/business/personal-finance/six-reasons-for-the-rental-crisis-and-why-free-beer-may-be-the-answer-1.3076718?mode=amp> (last accessed 01/11/2017)

⁹²Teresa Heeney, CEO of Early Childhood Ireland (2017) Thousands of families to lose out on money for childcare as Revenue can't give data to government. <https://goo.gl/crGe6W> (last accessed 01/11/2017)

⁹³Inclusion Ireland, Down Syndrome Ireland and Centre for Independent Living (2016) A Manifesto for Community Inclusion <http://www.inclusionireland.ie/sites/default/files/attach/basic-page/512/collaboration-manifesto-final.pdf> (last accessed 01/11/2017)

⁹⁴Watson, D. Banks, J. and Lyons, S. (2015) Educational and Employment Experiences of People with a Disability in Ireland: An Analysis of the National Disability Survey. Dublin: ESRI.

⁹⁵The working group was set up by the Department of Social Protection and involves representatives from government, the National Disability Authority and academics.

Outside employment, transport and housing are major problems. Nationwide, only 56% of the national coach fleet are deemed accessible⁹⁶. Given the greater chance for a person with a disability to be in poverty and the wider housing shortage context, finding accessible housing is an issue⁹⁷, with the reduction in the Housing Adaption Grant exacerbating the problem⁹⁸. On top of this, Inclusion Ireland argues that the level of disability benefits⁹⁹ is insufficient as it does not reflect the higher costs of living that people with disabilities face. They suggest a working group should be set-up to determine a more adequate level.

The Supreme Court has ruled the ban on asylum seekers finding work is unconstitutional¹⁰⁰. Ireland is one of two EU member states which prohibits asylum seekers from finding employment during the asylum application procedure, despite 55% of applicants spending more than five years in the asylum system in Ireland¹⁰¹. Evidence from Ireland demonstrates that denying employment to asylum seekers can lead to poverty and social exclusion¹⁰². Furthermore, it prevents the wider benefits that employment can bring for the host society through better integration prospects and taxation. Following the decision of the Supreme Court, it is now up to the government to amend the legislation on this.

Youth employment is improving. Whether this is because of the youth guarantee or a wider improvement in economic circumstances is unclear. Rising employment is corresponding with reduced uptake of youth guarantee programmes, the number of young people entering programmes was 23,000 in 2014 and 19,000 in 2015¹⁰³.

The financing of new homecare packages for community care needs re-thinking. The Irish contributors welcome the government's commitment to increasing access to home care packages, which can prevent unnecessary hospital stays and reduce the pressure on health and social services. But there are concerns regarding the proposed inclusion of home care packages into the Fair Deal system of funding¹⁰⁴. As it currently operates, an individual in a nursing home pays 80% of their income towards the cost of their care. This would not be feasible for someone living at home, who must cover other living costs such as food and energy¹⁰⁵.

⁹⁶Disable inequality, Transport and Disability Factsheet. <http://disableinequality.ie/transport-and-disability-factsheet/>
⁹⁷Inclusion Ireland Ibid

⁹⁸Disability Federation (2016) DFI Pre Budget Submission Make or Break. <http://www.disability-federation.ie/index.php?uniqueID=11154> (last accessed 01/11/2017)

⁹⁹Currently €193 a week

¹⁰⁰Newstalk (2017) Asylum seekers will "soon" be allowed to work. <http://www.newstalk.com/Asylum-seekers-will-soon-be-allowed-to-work-> (last accessed 01/11/2017)

¹⁰¹Working Group on improvements to the Protection Process including Direct Provision and Supports to Asylum Seekers (2015) Final Report <https://goo.gl/YjouuH> (last accessed 01/11/2017)

¹⁰²Stewart, R. (2006) The mental health promotion needs of asylum seekers and refugees: a qualitative study in direct provision centres and private accommodation in Galway City <http://www.lenus.ie/hse/bitstream/10147/44902/1/6553.pdf> (last accessed 01/11/2017)

¹⁰³Minister Leo Varadkar 1 March 2017 answer to parliamentary question

¹⁰⁴Fair Deal is a system that is currently in place whereby the cost of a person's stay in nursing home care is met by the government and the individual. This can be a percentage of their income, or, where the individual has property, this can be used as a means of finance.

¹⁰⁵Ni Aodha, G. (2017) 'It's too blunt': Concerns around adding home care to Fair Deal scheme <http://www.thejournal.ie/nursing-home-care-bill-3216826-Feb2017/> (last accessed 01/11/2017)

Italy

Employment rates have improved but more efficient policies need to be adopted to fight youth unemployment. In January 2017, the employment rate was 57.3%, and the unemployment rate had decreased to 11.9%, with 417,000 more people in work compared to 2016. In the same period, the use of vouchers⁷⁹ doubled contributing to the insecurity of the job market, as there has been an increasing use of vouchers instead of regular contracts⁸⁰. The Jobs Act has proven to lack active policies, especially towards addressing youth unemployment.

The Youth Guarantee has still not unfolded its potential mainly due to the lack of targeted policies and tools from regional authorities in charge of the programme. Moreover, the employment agencies are dramatically lacking workforce⁸¹, hence it is extremely difficult to follow each user individually. Regional authorities are also redefining their competences after the abolishment of provinces, previously in charge of employment services. Geographical differences between Southern and Northern regions are also affecting the efficiency of the programme as well as low interregional mobility. It is also worrying that the planned measures and the allocation of the budget do not match specific geographical needs or the identification of priority groups.

The uneven regional distribution of migrants needs to be addressed. Of the 175,485 migrants that arrived in Italy, 136,706 live in accommodation centres. Currently there is an uneven distribution of migrants

among the regions and an increasing number of municipalities are refusing to host migrants.

A plan assigning 2.5 migrants for every 1,000 inhabitants was agreed in September 2016. The National Association of Municipalities (ANCI) and the Government signed the official agreement in December 2016. The central government has also allocated €100 million to local authorities willing to receive migrants. However, only 2,600 municipalities out of 8,000 have welcomed asylum seekers⁸². Moreover, only just over 1,000 local authorities have implemented the System for the protection for refugees and asylum seekers (SPRAR)⁸³.

According to data provided by the Ministry of the Interior, 14,194 immigrants (8%), have been relocated to the Veneto Region but 250 mayors refused to receive them. Lombardy is the region with the highest number of migrants (22,953), although only 500 out of 1,500 local authorities are hosting them. In the Lazio Region, only one third of the municipalities host migrants, and Valle d'Aosta Region did not provide any places through the SPRAR system.

Therefore, the regional and local redistribution of migrants is becoming a serious issue together with the administrative delays that oblige migrants to live in accommodation centres for longer periods of time⁸⁴. Some centres are meant to host migrants only for 35 days but in many cases, their stay could last for more than a year.

⁷⁹Vouchers are coupons used to pay subsidiary work provisions. Every voucher has a value of €10 (75% net to be paid to the worker).

⁸⁰The misuse of vouchers caused a political debate that ended with the adoption of Law n. 96 last June 2017. This law sets some restrictions on work activities, categories of workers, and the overall use of vouchers.

⁸¹In Italy, the ratio between operator/users is 1/354, whereas in other European countries the ratio is 1/24 in UK, 1/49 in Germany and 1/70 in France.

⁸²Baratta, Lidia (2017) Ecco i comuni che dovrebbero accogliere i migranti, e non lo fanno [Municipalities that should receive migrants but do not] <http://www.linkiesta.it/it/article/2017/01/05/ecco-i-comuni-che-dovrebbero-accogliere-i-migranti-e-non-lo-fanno/32868/> (last accessed 27/07/17)

⁸³Created by Law No 189/2002, the SPRAR is a network of local authorities that implement projects for migrants and is funded by the National Fund for Asylum Policies and Services. Local authorities, in cooperation with voluntary based organisations, undertake 'integrated reception' interventions aiming at providing legal services, social guidance and support, and the development of individual programmes to promote socioeconomic inclusion and integration. More about the SPRAR is available at: www.sprar.it (last accessed 27/07/17)

⁸⁴There are different types of accommodation provided to migrants: first aid and reception centres (CPSA – Centro di primo soccorso e accoglienza), centres for asylum seekers (CARA – Centro di accoglienza per i richiedenti asilo) and centres for the identification and expulsion (CPR – Centro permanente per il rimpatrio). Migrants can also be accommodated in private flats, apartments and houses with the adequate legal living standards.

Fighting poverty is at the core of the newly approved social income policy although effects are mitigated by the lack of resources.

The Act on the Social Inclusion Income (REIS) approved in June 2017 has now replaced the Support for Active Inclusion or SIA programme. The REIS will be provided to families with children, people with serious disabilities, pregnant women or older unemployed people, and consists of a monthly benefit from €190 to €485 depending on different criteria. It has been noted that the resources available for the REIS benefit are not sufficient to help families to get out of poverty⁸⁵. On top of the REIS, national authorities are also discussing the adoption of a universal minimum income against absolute poverty to be issued together with other benefits from local social services.

At local level, the issue of social housing needs to be addressed to provide more sustainable long-term solutions. Local social services face many obstacles when addressing complex situations that combine economic support, housing and active social inclusion policies. There are two main types of social housing interventions, namely temporary accommodation (individual, collective and social housing), and individual accommodation for permanent residency. Currently, municipalities are struggling to provide adequate accommodation for people affected by housing emergencies without the means to access a safe living space, and people who have income but are not able to cover all rent costs.

The availability and accessibility of social services for vulnerable groups in Italy are still an issue.

Older people and migrants have more difficulties than other vulnerable groups to access health and social services. Accessibility to services is also hindered by the general inaccessibility of public transportation for people with disabilities and reduced mobility.

Measures have been introduced to help families with new born children to support their nursery and baby-sitting expenses. The Stability Law of 2017 has extended the use of babysitter and nursery school vouchers previously due to end in 2016. Up to 11 months after returning to work from compulsory maternity leave, working mothers can claim babysitter or nursery school vouchers instead of taking parental leave. This is an allowance of €600 per month to contribute to the cost of a babysitter or a nursery, payable for each month of waived parental leave (optional), for a maximum of six months (3 months for self-employed women).

The voucher is also payable to women who leave their babies with parents or grandparents. Public sector workers, who were excluded up to 2016, will now be able to benefit from the revised voucher system.

The public support system for long-term care (LTC) is largely insufficient to face the demand for services.

The national health service supports only one fourth of the population in need of LTC, leaving 3 million people depending on relatives' care. National healthcare only provides Integrated Home Care (ADI) and nursing homes (Residenza sanitaria assistenziale – RSA). The ADI system aims at limiting hospitalisation through the provision of home services. RSAs are nursing homes for older people in need of medical care that can host users from two weeks up to indefinite periods of time. The lack of services integration is a key issue that needs to be addressed to improve the quality of the services that nowadays are extremely fragmented and based mainly on financial support.

⁸⁵The Parliamentary Budget Office states that the allocation for REIS in 2017 is 1.2 billion and in 2018 it will be 1.7 billion. But the Ministry of Labour Working Group on Minimum Income estimated the cost of a measure capable of lifting all families in absolute poverty out of poverty as between 5 and 7 billion. According to ISTAT data, there are 4.6 million Italian people living in poverty.

Latvia

There is a need for better cooperation to integrate NEETs in education or employment. Aiming at better integrating young people not in employment, education or training, the national project 'To Know and to Do!' managed by the Agency of International Programmes for Youth has succeeded in establishing successful partnerships between national and local authorities to provide support for young people. Nevertheless, more efficient mechanisms for institutional cooperation between employment services, schools, municipalities and social services are key to ensure the success of the project in reducing the number of school drop-outs and support socially excluded young people. Moreover, the strict formal selection criteria make the implementation of the project challenging. Only young people aged between 15 and 29 years old who do not study or work, and are not registered as unemployed with the State Employment Agency (SEA) are eligible for the project. Such criteria do not include early school leavers, who are still formally registered in school, or unemployed young people aged 15 or more whose families receive social assistance¹⁰⁶.

While the number of children in institutions is decreasing, support for families with children is key to reduce numbers of children in institutional care. In Riga, the number of children in social care decreased from 524 in 2014 to 418 in 2016¹⁰⁷. Approximately one quarter of children are in institutions, while the rest are in alternative family care. However, more needs to be done to assist families with children. Although national policy measures support families with children, single parents and large families (3+ children) are at a higher risk¹⁰⁸.

When it comes to early childcare support, national authorities have stopped financing childcare vouchers for children who cannot be assigned a place in public kindergartens, and have transferred the responsibility back to the municipalities. Unfortunately, due to the municipalities facing significant funding issues, most children are left without vouchers, therefore increasing the risk of social disparities.

EU funding is key for guaranteeing the success of deinstitutionalisation (DI) and for tackling unemployment. However, funds need to be administered more effectively and delivered to better tailored service providers. The coordination between multiple actors entails high costs in terms of time and funding, which could be used more effectively towards the creation and the delivery of services. For example, in the DI process, the Ministry of Welfare, the planning regions, the Central Finance and Contracting Agency, the Ministry for Environmental Protection and Regional Development, the Council of development of social services and municipalities are involved. As a result, great effort is put in the coordination of bodies at the expense of outcomes. On the other hand, the tool Support Intensity Scale (SIS)¹⁰⁹ represents a successful example of EU funds implementation. The project aimed to assess the needs of 2,100 adults of whom 700 live in long-term care (LTC) institutions. 1,591 people have been assessed so far, 454 of whom live in public LTC institutions. This assessment aims to better understand their needs to design better services.

¹⁰⁶ Law on Social Services and Social Assistance.

¹⁰⁷ Yearbook of Riga City Welfare Department (2016) p.60. <http://www.ld.riga.lv/files/Gadagramatas/Gals%202017.pdf> (last accessed 27/08/17)

¹⁰⁸ At-risk-of-poverty rate by household type (%) // Central Statistical Bureau. http://data.csb.gov.lv/pxweb/en/Sociala/Sociala_ikgad_monetara_nab/N10050.px/table/tableViewLayout2/?rxid=562c2205-ba57-4130-b63a-6991f49ab6fe (last accessed 27/08/17)

¹⁰⁹ The Support Intensity Scale (SIS) is a tool to assess individual's support needs developed by the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD).

Concerning unemployment policies, EU funding would be more effective if distributed between the state agencies and the municipalities. This would allow social services to prepare the long-term unemployed or those who have complex needs to access national Active Labour Market Policy (ALMP) initiatives. These active policies include for example entering formal education to qualify or requalify for the job market or accepting temporary public work. However, analysis provided by the Riga Municipality Social Service Agency (SSA) shows that most service users are not able to enter ALMPs implemented by the SEA without appropriate and targeted intervention on social and health issues, rehabilitation, skills and employability, and motivation. EU funding for the promotion of employment in Latvia has mainly been received by the SEA but part of the funds should be given directly to municipalities so that they can design and provide services prior to enter the SEA programmes.

More needs to be done to reduce disparities between municipalities. The Municipal Finance Equalisation mechanism was created to provide municipalities with sufficient funds to provide local services given that they are required to deliver the same type of services regardless of their size. In the last years, there has been an important transfer of competencies from the national to the local level not followed by adequate funding. Municipalities are mainly financed by individual income (80%) and real property taxes so municipalities with less working people or cheaper properties risk to suffer from lack of resources. According to the City of Riga Welfare Department, if the national budget does not take into account difficulties related to financing at local level, there is a high risk of increasing social inequalities among municipalities.

Poverty is still very high especially for older people and people with disabilities. The Law on social services and social assistance establishes that the national budget needs to co-fund social assistance benefits but this is not respected. The lack of national funds needs to be tackled in the short term for older people and people with disabilities, who experience high levels of poverty. For example, 74% of single older people were at risk of poverty in 2015¹¹⁰. The average old-age pension in Riga was €297.94 in December 2015 and €306.63 in December 2016. On average, the newly granted disability benefit paid in 2016 is only €148.73, which is 15% less than the average paid disability benefit (€174.35)¹¹¹. The City of Riga recommends updating the minimum income in Latvia and matching it with the minimum state disability benefit and pension to reduce the disparity between these two types of financial support.

Accessing care is still critical for many social services users and the lack of coordination between health professionals and social services is causing major problems for those with LTC needs. In the City of Riga, primary care doctors avoid registering individuals in long-term care institutions with local health services as they would have to undertake a home visit which can be very expensive. Therefore, the staff in LTC institutions must take service users to the health centre, which is a difficult and impractical process for many of the users. The same happens for people with dementia or children with special needs in the day centres. Moreover, the long waiting lists and the general lack of specialists due to inadequate funding needs to be addressed in the short term.

¹¹⁰NIG05. At-risk-of-poverty rate by household type // Central Statistical Bureau. http://data.csb.gov.lv/pxweb/en/Sociala/Sociala_ikgad_monetara_nab/Ni0050.px/table/tableViewLayout2/?rxid=562c2205-ba57-4130-b63a-6991f49ab6fe (last accessed 27/08/17)

¹¹¹State Social Insurance Agency Data.

Lithuania

An increase in social assistance aims to alleviate poverty. From 2018, the Lithuanian government plans to spend an additional €483 million on social assistance to alleviate poverty, building on the existing €4 billion budget for social assistance. The additional funds will be distributed to several vulnerable groups. A monthly child allowance of €30 per child, up to a maximum of €75 for three children and above will be allocated to all families regardless of income. The social security pension will be increased by €20 per month, whilst social assistance benefits will increase by a similar amount, from €12 to €36 per month. Furthermore, the level of non-taxable income will increase to the level of the minimum wage (€380 per month). The combined effects of these changes mean that a two-child family where both parents earn the monthly minimum wage will see their monthly income increase by €78. The increase in state pensions will be vital for supporting older people, given that at the end of 2016, 46% of pensions were lower than €238 per month¹¹².

Youth unemployment is decreasing, but more needs to be done to support young people's transition from education to work. Youth unemployment in Lithuania in 2016 was 12.8%, down from 27% in 2012¹¹³. High levels of youth emigration and the impact of programmes to increase youth involvement in the labour market are cited as the reasons for the reduction in youth unemployment according to the Lithuanian contributor¹¹⁴. However, these programmes have also been strongly criticised¹¹⁵. For example, one project 'Discover Yourself'¹¹⁶, funded by the EU, did not sufficiently involve employer organisations, and participants were largely placed in poor quality jobs¹¹⁷.

The Lithuanian contributor argues that too many young people who have graduated from vocational or higher education are unable to find employment, and that more should be done to better match the skills of young people with the demands of employers.

Greater support for child adoption is supporting the deinstitutionalisation of child social care. In 2016, about 5,500 children were in care in Lithuania. Of these, 3,186 were in institutions compared to 3,225 in 2015¹¹⁸. New regulations mean that children younger than three years old are not placed in institutions. A new system of temporary foster families has begun in several municipalities, and will be rolled out nationally from 2018. This support structure will intervene when a child urgently requires care beyond the ability of a child's guardian, the provision of temporary care for the child for up to one year, and respite service for carers. Furthermore, to encourage fostering, foster families have been granted leave measures, equal to that of biological parents, whilst the Child Benefit Act has been amended to introduce a child adoption benefit of €304 per month for two years.

More targeted support is needed to improve the employment of people with disabilities. Of 170,000 people with disabilities of working age, only 47,000 (about 27%) are in work, a situation which has not improved much over the last ten years¹¹⁹. Funding to improve the employment of people with disabilities has focussed on social enterprises thanks to €150 million of state money for social enterprises over the lifetime of the Law on Social Enterprises, with the number of people with disabilities employed at these companies rising from 655 in 2004 to 6,231 in 2016¹²⁰.

¹¹²Department of Statistics Lithuania (2016)

¹¹³Statistics Lithuania (2016) Economic and Social Developments in Lithuania <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/services-portlet/pub-edition-file?id=25500> (last accessed 01/11/2017)

¹¹⁴Justinas Sadauskas, Associate Professor, Institute of Education Sciences and Social Work, Mykolas Romeris University

¹¹⁵Delfi (2017) Young people: poor training opportunities and emigration <https://goo.gl/H28hDZ> (last accessed 01/11/2017)

¹¹⁶Youth guarantee Lithuania (2017) Discover Yourself. <https://jaunimogarantijos.lt/en/projects/discover-yourself/136> (last accessed 01/11/2017)

¹¹⁷15min (2017) Employment projects. <https://www.15min.lt/verslas/naujienu/bendroves/milijoninius-darbo-birzos-projektus-lydi-kuriozai-663-830868> (last accessed 01/11/2017)

¹¹⁸State Children's rights and services, Ministry of Social Security and Labour (2017) 2016 Activity Report. http://vaikoteises.lt/media/file/ataskaitos/2016_m.%20ataskaita.pdf (last accessed 01/11/2017)

¹¹⁹Lithuanian Disability Forum (2017) The Lithuanian Disability Forum calls for reform of the system for supporting the employment of people with disabilities. <http://inf.lt/zmoniu-su-negalia-organizacijos-kviecia-pertvarkyti-neigaliuju-uzimtumo-remimo-sistema-pagrindu/> (last accessed 01/11/2017)

¹²⁰Ibid

However, The Lithuanian Forum for People with Disabilities has labelled this policy as inappropriate and ineffective, and highlights that 90% of subsidies given to social enterprises for employing people with disabilities were used to offset the wages of other employees. The employment of people with disabilities through social enterprises has also been criticised for narrowing the job opportunities available to them, due to their limited ability to offer a variety of work positions.

The Lithuanian contributor echoes the recommendation of the Lithuanian Forum for People with Disabilities, which states that more targeted support in the form of skills training, work assistants, case managers, adaptations to work environments, compensation for transport and additional leave allowances would be more sustainable and cost-effective in the long-term.

Social housing developments are not matching demand. Lithuania's National Progress Programme 2014-2020 had the goal of increasing the availability of housing for vulnerable groups by 100%. However, the goal has now changed, and the aim is that 20% of people on the social housing waiting list will access rent subsidies by 2020. Despite €21 million spent by the national government and €3.6 million by local authorities to provide social housing, the number of people on the waiting lists grew faster than the number of housing units created, leading to a change in the strategy. However, policy analysis highlights that a rent subsidy system will be ineffective, and that action must be targeted towards increasing the availability of housing¹²¹. The same analysis concludes that European Regional Development Funds (ERDF) of €49.9 million to provide social housing units have been used ineffectively, failing to find the most cost-effective methods to provide housing.

¹²¹National Audit Office of the Republic of Lithuania (2017) Housing access for low income citizens. <https://goo.gl/nWwc76> (last accessed 01/11/2017)

The Netherlands

While the overall employment rate is high in the Netherlands, some groups are lagging behind, such as non-EU born migrants. With the Participation Act in force since 2015, the responsibility for groups at the margin of the labour market lies primarily with the municipalities. In 2016, two reports published by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment showed that the Participation Act only had a limited impact in improving vulnerable groups' participation in the labour market. There has been a rise in social assistance beneficiaries, which is partly due to new groups qualifying for the social assistance benefit, namely young people with disabilities and young refugees.

Since 2015, two other social support laws have come into force: the Youth Act and the Social Support Act. Together with the Participation Act, these two laws have provided the municipalities with a significant number of responsibilities in the field of public social policies. A key idea behind the reform and this transfer of responsibilities was to provide tailor-made, integrated and coherent support for those people who lack the ability to find solutions by themselves or through their social networks. The goal of the three laws is to help people to play an active role in society.

The measures put in place by the municipalities to achieve this aim depend on the specific needs of the person or household but may include, among others, providing support in finding work or in improving the income situation of families, as well as providing child and youth care. Particular attention is paid to families that face multiple problems related to income, indebtedness, education, or health (including mental health problems).

In October 2016, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment announced that municipalities would have a two-year period to implement national social assistance rules in a way which is adapted to their local situation. In this regard, there is an on-going discussion on the potential of alternative measures that go beyond conventional employment-related approaches, such as the so-called 'civic contribution' measure, which implies that those in receipt of welfare payments have the obligation to do community work in return for the payments.

There is a need to address the limitations of a 'work-first' approach to lift families out of poverty.

The Dutch 'work-first' approach for vulnerable families emphasises work as the primary remedy to combat poverty. In fact, in 2016 the government decided to invest an additional €100 million annually to tackle child poverty¹²². This budget is solely meant to support children living in households with low income. However, there is an ongoing debate regarding the limitations of this approach. When it comes to child poverty, thanks to improved knowledge, importance is increasingly being given to factors that contribute to create a general positive environment for the development of the child. Given the new municipal responsibilities in the field of social policies, the municipalities are well-placed to address and undertake actions that contribute to children's development to support families out of poverty.

¹²²Stella Hoff (2017) Armoede onder kinderen. Een probleemschets https://www.scp.nl/Publicaties/Alle_publicaties/Publicaties_2017/Armoede_onder_kinderen (last accessed 01/09/2017)

The arrival of asylum seekers in 2015, including many unaccompanied children, posed several challenges to public education. Until 2013, asylum seekers accounted for an average of approximately 2,400 new pupils per year in compulsory education. The intake significantly increased to 4,900 in 2014 and to 12,700 in 2015¹²³. These numbers have placed a significant challenge for the municipalities, which are responsible for providing education for asylum-seeking children in collaboration with schools.

The European Commission report should distinguish clearly between issues affecting migrants and those affecting refugees. According to the Network of Directors Social Domain, the European Commission report does not establish a clear difference between the issues that affect migrants on the one hand, and the issues that affect refugees on the other. The contributor points out that it is crucial to avoid considering these two complex groups as a unique group in order to effectively tackle the issues they face. For example, asylum-seekers that receive refugee status have less difficulties in accessing housing or education than those who have not been given this status. Moreover, migrants are also a very diverse group, comprising first, second and third generation migrants. For second and third generation migrants, a key-issue is being part of two cultures and being able to access the labour market to successfully integrate into Dutch society. According to the National Association of Local Governments for Social Welfare, tensions are increasing, which suggests more needs to be done to support migrants' and refugees' integration.

¹²³Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (2016) Nadere informatie over asielzoekerskinderen in het Onderwijs. <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2016/05/20/kamerbrief-met-nadere-informatie-over-asielzoekerskinderen-in-het-onderwijs> (last accessed 01/09/2017)

Poland

Despite positive developments in the labour market, the employment rate of people with disabilities continues to be low. Indeed, the employment rate of people with disabilities has hardly changed in recent years, further widening the gap with the gradually increasing employment rate of people without disabilities. According to Miroslaw Grewinski from Janusz Korczak Pedagogical University in Warsaw, there is a lack of cooperation between services, as it is the case between employment and social services. Even though people with disabilities are supported by the PFRON (State Fund for the Rehabilitation of Disabled People), they have difficulties in accessing the labour market because of low awareness of employers, numerous stereotypes and prejudices, and the fear of people with disabilities to lose their benefits if they enter employment.

It is difficult to assess the effects of social policies funded with EU funds. There are several reasons for this. Throughout the duration of the projects, the focus is mainly put on quantitative indicators and financial outputs, rather than on an in-depth analysis of outcomes. In addition, EU projects do not have long-term effects because these projects are not mainstreamed in public policies. Therefore, many local authorities and NGOs are spending EU funds, but they are not creating synergies and multiplying effects.

There are mixed views with regards to the family programme Family 500+. The programme 'Family 500+' adopted in February 2016 established a universal child benefit of €114¹²⁴ which is paid monthly for every second child under 18, and for the first child if the family monthly income is below €182¹²⁵ or €273¹²⁶ in the case of a child with a disability¹²⁷.

The European Commission's report points out that the universal child benefit programme is expected to reduce poverty and inequality but raises questions in terms of cost-effectiveness. The reform is expected to considerably reduce poverty in households with three or more children and among single parents.

According to a communication from the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, the '500 + Family Programme' has brought many benefits and material improvements to the situation of Polish households. Average monthly household expenditure reached the value of €265.77¹²⁸ in 2016, which represents an increase of 4.3% compared to 2015. Expenditure on consumer goods and services amounted to an average of €254.26¹²⁹, which represented a 4.5% increase with regards to 2015. Therefore, the policy has had as an immediate effect in increasing families' purchasing power.

However, the impact of the programme on the participation of women in the labour market and children's access to pre-primary education (especially in rural areas with less developed infrastructure) remains controversial. Finally, the pro-natal effect of the policy also remains doubtful. Moreover, there is no clear link between the different forms of family support and benefits, such as the big family card, maternity leave, the 500+ programme, or family assistants.

Abolishing compulsory education for five-year-olds weakens the educational chances of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

According to Miroslaw Grewinski, there is a lack of understanding in Polish society of how important this stage of education is. Therefore, there is a need to implement a comprehensive strategy, which includes large information and education campaigns to improve understanding of this education phase, as well as enhancing the availability of places in public kindergartens, especially in large urban and rural areas.

¹²⁴PLN 500

¹²⁵PLN 800

¹²⁶PLN 1,200

¹²⁷Agnieszka Sowa (2016) "Family 500+": A new family income-supporting benefit in Poland. European Social Policy Network Flash Report 2016/45. <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=16077&langId=en> (last accessed 01/09/2017)

¹²⁸PLN 1,132

¹²⁹PLN 1,083

Temporary immigration, mostly from Ukraine, and to a lesser extent from Belarus and other countries, is increasing. However, there is no specific immigration policy. In fact, the Polish government did not support the relocation programme for Syrian refugees proposed by the European Commission. Moreover, there is a lack of professionals involved in the integration of migrants. In order to solve this shortage, new specialisation and educational programmes need to be set up.

There is a lack of integration between healthcare and social care services in long-term care. With the old-age dependency ratio expected to double from 22% in 2015 to 45% in 2045, long-term care needs will increase substantially and securing sufficient institutional support will be a challenge. Therefore, as the contributor points out, it is crucial to enhance coordination between health and social care services, because of the increasing number of older people and the limitations of the traditional family model. The public long-term care system is not able to cover the increasing needs and the gap is filled by private organisations providing care services. However, the availability of those services is limited due to financial and territorial constraints.

Long-term care is predominantly provided by relatives who receive limited public support. Formal care provision is very low, reaching only 4.6% of the dependent population for home care and 3.4% for residential care. In order to improve this situation, Miroslaw Grewinski suggests that effective support should be given to informal carers, providing them with the necessary training and a fair pay. Moreover, the establishment of day care centres in all Polish municipalities is a big challenge for the future.

Portugal

Unemployment rates continued to fall in 2015 and 2016, but are still higher than before 2008 and above the EU average. The percentage of registered unemployed people fell from 26% in 2015 to 18.2% in 2016. The Government published an assessment on active labour market policies in June 2016, which highlights the need to slow down the overall supply of active labour market measures and focus on schemes that foster job creation on permanent contracts. Moreover, long-term unemployment accounts for over half of total unemployment.

There are doubts about active labour market policies' efficiency in creating sustainable employment. According to the Association of Social Services Professionals, austerity measures had a very negative impact on the Portuguese economy and, consequently, on the job market. The lack of opportunities in the job market impacted negatively on the willingness of Portuguese people to invest in education and training. Public employment services are very negatively perceived because they have been failing to provide citizens with good quality job offers due to the bad economic situation.

In order to improve this situation, new labour market programmes such as Qualifica are being implemented¹³⁰. This programme aims to improve the level of education and training of adults to increase their employability. However, the Association of Social Services Professionals highlights that it is crucial that efforts are also made on the employer's side, creating incentives and obligations towards integrating citizens furthest from the labour market through regular labour market policies.

Regarding the employment of people with disabilities, the programme Qualifica is expected to have some positive outcomes. In addition to this, the recently created post of Secretary of State for Inclusion of People with Disabilities is likely to raise awareness on the necessity to provide jobs for this vulnerable group of society. In 2017, a reformulation of the main social benefits provided to people with disabilities is expected to reach 120,000 people of working age.

Indicators of inequality, poverty and social exclusion improved in 2015. Severe material deprivation decreased from 10.6% to 9.6% and the minimum wage increased by 5,1%. Disability benefits and benefits for single parent families have also increased. However, Portugal still has one of the highest income inequalities in Europe and in-work poverty remains high. The economic crisis and austerity measures affected vulnerable people most severely, particularly low-income households with dependent children. In order to continue fighting poverty and inequality, a new means-tested social benefit has been introduced for unemployed people who no longer have access to unemployment benefits. This measure, designed to reach 70,000 people until 2020, aims to rebuild citizens trust in public services by breaking the poverty circle.

Moreover, given the large proportion of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (29.1% in 2015), in January 2016 the government increased monthly child benefits between 2% and 3.5% as well as the additional income given to one parent families from 20% to 35%¹³¹. Persistent inequalities and poverty, as well as the increased demand and scarce resources, have created scepticism amongst the population on the capacity of social services to meet their needs.

¹³⁰Qualifica Programme <https://www.qualifica.gov.pt/#/> (last accessed 01/09/2017)

¹³¹Country Report Portugal (2017) Including an In-Depth Review on the prevention and correction of macroeconomic imbalances. <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/2017-european-semester-country-report-portugal-en.pdf> (last accessed 01/09/2017)

With the objective of building an integrated anti-poverty strategy, a working group under the supervision of the Portuguese Anti-Poverty Network produced a National Strategy for the Eradication of Poverty¹³². This document was presented in the Portuguese parliament to raise awareness amongst the different political parties. It underlines the importance of building an integrated approach to tackle social problems and to pay attention to the undesirable effects of some public policy measures on the (re)production of poverty.

Further cooperation between public authorities and NGOs is needed for the effective provision of social services.

Due to the increase in the demand for social services, the current Government is promoting cooperation with NGOs to deliver services funded by public authorities, mostly to provide emergency initiatives. However, the Association of Social Services Professionals has been pointing out that stronger coordination is needed between NGOs and public authorities to avoid services segmentation. In May 2017, the Ministry of Labour, Social Security and Solidarity signed an agreement with the representatives of NGOs federations aimed at reinforcing the partnership between the different actors involved in the provision of social services and to build new shared objectives.

Despite some progress, there have been delays in simplifying local and central administrative procedures with little coordination between the different levels of public administration. The issue of coordination still needs to be addressed. At local level, reforms seem to have been implemented in different ways, resulting in different quality standards for municipal services. There are ongoing discussions in Parliament on decentralisation and regional disparities with regards to social services. Some of the crucial topics of the debate are the transfer of resources to local authorities, the degree of autonomy/dependency of local authorities, and who holds the responsibility for monitoring social services. This topic has been given a lot of attention due to the local elections that took place in October 2017.

Children and adults' deinstitutionalisation

progressed before the economic crisis through the launch of a special programme called 'DOM Plan' that aimed to improve the care provided to these groups. However, over the past years, there has been no significant developments due to the economic crisis. The number of children living in institutions remains stable at around 8,000. It is important to point out that children transferred to institutions are older than before and present more complex needs. A new legislative framework was approved in 2015 to set up a programme aiming at accelerating foster care and family care. Additional measures are being taken to promote the adoption of children that because of their age, health situation, disabilities or other characteristics (e.g. it is in their best interest to remain with a sibling), have difficulties being adopted.

Portugal approved a National Health Plan for the period 2016-2020 targeted to older people. This plan builds on European policies for older people such as active and healthy ageing. The National Programme for the Health of Elderly people is part of the National Health Plan and aims to maintain autonomy, independence, quality of life and overall recovery of older people primarily in their homes and everyday life contexts. The goals of the Plan for 2020 are¹³³:

- 30% reduction in premature mortality (before the age of 70),
- Improve healthy life expectancy at 65 years old,
- Reduce the prevalence of two risk factors related to non-communicable diseases, namely childhood obesity and smoking.

¹³²EAPN Portugal (2016) Annual Report Summary. <http://www.eapn.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/EAPN-EAPN-Portugal-Annual-Report-2016-1082.pdf> (last accessed 04/09/2017)

¹³³Roberto Falvo et al., (2017) Health Promotion for Older People in Portugal. *Zdrowie Publiczne i Zarządzanie* 2017; 15 (1): 49–61. <http://www.ejournals.eu/pliki/art/8694/> (last accessed 28/09/2017)

Romania

To prevent separating children from their parents, social support should be reoriented towards prevention. In Romania, many children continue to be separated from their families because of poverty, violence, neglect or social exclusion. In 2016, the National Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights and Adoption (ANPDCA) reported that 19,832 out of the 57,452 children in the child protection system were in institutional care (approximately 35% of all children in the child protection system).

An additional 58,022 children benefited from preventative services in the community, such as day care, counselling and support centres¹³⁴. In 2016, the process of deinstitutionalisation (DI) of children focused on improving the legislation related to adoptions, on streamlining the process of assessing the situation of children in the social protection system, and improving and developing family-type care alternatives¹³⁵. The Ministry of Labour with the support of EU funds has started a project that seeks to develop services to provide systemic support to families through integrated access to community services such as healthcare, education, jobs, housing, and other public services.

Special attention needs to be paid to children whose parents work abroad. According to the ANPDCA, the total number of children having parents working abroad is 94,662¹³⁶. Romania has approved a series of measures to monitor the situation of children whose parents are abroad. Most of the measures are related to monitoring the children, and not necessarily supporting them with proper services. Community social services should visit once every two months the children's caregivers to inform and advise them on their responsibility for raising and caring for the child. However, there is no specialised or trained staff to provide adequate support to these children.

The provision of active labour market policies without social services will not succeed in reducing youth unemployment. County employment agencies, which are responsible for the implementation of the national employment strategy, have had difficulties in identifying and registering NEETs. In order to overcome these difficulties, in December 2016, the Ministry of European Funds (MFE) launched a public call of proposals for a project targeting NEETs aged 16 to 24¹³⁷. Moreover, in March 2017 a guide was issued with the objective of addressing the difficulties related to the registration of NEETs in public employment services¹³⁸, but more needs to be done. According to the Romanian Association of Social Workers (ASproAS), the most sustainable way to integrate NEETs into the labour market is to support them in the community through integrated teams (social workers, community health assistants, mediators and educational counsellors), and better coordination between social and employment services. Finally, special attention must be paid to the complex needs of young people in rural areas.

In order to efficiently combat poverty and social exclusion, public social services should attract, motivate and retain a skilful, qualified and dedicated workforce. Local authorities are still struggling to hire staff mainly due to budget deficits. Currently, there are major changes in relation to the remuneration of public services' staff. This could have a negative impact on the employment of social workers and professionalisation of community social services.

¹³⁴ Ministry of Labour and Social. <http://www.copii.ro/statistici/> (last accessed 30/08/17)

¹³⁵ Law N. 57/2016 (11 April 2016). https://static.anaf.ro/static/10/Anaf/legislatie/L_57_2016.pdf (last accessed 30/08/17)

¹³⁶ Ministry of Labour and Social Justice. <http://www.copii.ro/statistici/> (last accessed 30/08/17)

¹³⁷ POCU: Applicant's guide to Calling Projects "Future for Youth" addressed to young NEETs in public consultation" (9 December 2016). <http://www.fonduri-structurale.ro/stiri/17857/pocu-ghidul-solicitantului-pentru-apelul-de-proiecte-viitor-pentru-tineri-adresat-tinerilor-neet-in-consultare-publica> (last accessed 30/08/17)

¹³⁸ Ibid

Combining a person-centred approach and integrating services is key to reduce poverty.

In 2016, the creation of pilot integrated teams in the community was presented as key to change the implementation approach of the 'anti-poverty package'¹³⁹. Unfortunately, at national level, the framework for the creation of such teams was never adopted. In 2016, the law on the Minimum Inclusion Income (MII)¹⁴⁰ was approved and will come into force in 2018. However, the law only reorganises the existing financial benefits, without mentioning the possibility to create integrated services teams to help people out of poverty.

The risk of poverty for Roma is three times higher.

The county offices for Roma are responsible for supporting the implementation of measures related to the integration of Roma¹⁴¹. School participation is still an issue due to the lack of identity papers, the difficulties for children to do their homework at home, and school supplies. In 2016, the World Bank initiated the Roma Sounding Board for Dialogue and Cooperation (RSB) to identify areas that require increased public policy attention for Roma, and propose possible solutions to help develop and strengthen the social inclusion of Roma. In 2016, other initiatives and projects were implemented to improve social housing. Nevertheless, the negative reactions of members of the community towards the relocation of Roma families from marginalised areas into their communities are growing¹⁴².

Improved attention must be paid to providing support for victims of domestic violence.

From 2010, there has been an increase in the number of domestic violence cases. According to the General Police Inspectorate (IGPR), in the first half of 2016, there were 8,926 complaints¹⁴³. Women were most affected (79% of the victims) and most of the aggressors were men (92.3%). The Istanbul Convention¹⁴⁴ entered into force in September 2016, and two programmes to develop services and shelters for women victims of violence at home were proposed, but rejected by the national government. According to ASproAS, domestic violence needs to be addressed in the short-term because of the raising number of victims.

¹³⁹The package integrates EU and national funds to assist people at risk of poverty. It was approved in February 2016 and it consists of 47 measures to combat poverty and promote social inclusion.

¹⁴⁰Law no. 196/2016.

¹⁴¹Strategy of the Romanian Government for the inclusion of the Romanian citizens belonging to the Roma minority for the period 2012-2020 and Government Decision no. 1221/2011

¹⁴²An example of the negative reaction of community members was registered in the municipality of Cluj in 2016: Gorgan, Carmen, "Romii de la Pata Rât primesc apartamente în Cluj-Napoca, Florești, Apahida și Baci. "Nu credeți că ar fi trebuit să fim întrebați și noi despre acest proiect? [The Roma from Pata Rat receive apartments in Cluj-Napoca, Florești, Apahida and Baci. "Don't you think we should have been asked about this project?]", Gazeta de Cluj (8 May 2017). <http://gazetadecluj.ro/romii-de-la-pata-rat-primesc-apartamente-cluj-napoca-floresti-apahida-si-baciu-nu-credeti-ca-ar-fi-trebuit-sa-fim-intrebat-si-noi-despre-acest-proiect/> (last accessed 30/08/17)

¹⁴³Network for the prevention and fight against violence towards women. <https://violentaimpotrivafemeilor.ro/statistici-privind-violenta-in-familie-aproape-noua-mii-de-cazuri-de-lovire-si-alte-violente-si-80-de-violuri-in-familie-in-primele-6-luni-ale-anului/> (last accessed 30/08/17)

¹⁴⁴Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. <https://www.coe.int/fr/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/090000168008482e> (last accessed 13/10/17)

Slovenia

According to the contributor from the Slovenian Association of Centres for Social Work (CCSW), social assistance does not sufficiently cover basic needs. The amendment to the Social Assistance Benefits Act, which revoked the inheritance conditions on real-estate for people receiving benefits, has led to an increase in social assistance recipients from approximately 10,000 in February 2017 to 14,000 in June. However, providing adequate social assistance remains a serious issue for older people. Many own real-estate worth more than €120,000, especially those in urban areas, and are therefore ineligible for this form of income support. Furthermore, legislation obliges citizens to care for their parents, even if their property is worth less than €120,000, although the extent of this care is not defined.

Since 2009, the index for calculating minimum income has been restricted to essential goods and services. The CCSW points out that more than half of the recipients of social assistance are long-term beneficiaries, and the minimum income level of €292.56 per month (as of 1 August 2016) is insufficient to meet the costs of living.

Several measures are needed to address child poverty. The at-risk-of-poverty rate for children in Slovenia was one of the lowest in the EU in 2005 at 12.1%. However, it increased to 14.8% in 2015. This rise of the at-risk-of-poverty rate is attributed to two main causes; less effective social assistance and labour market trends¹⁴⁵.

The CCSW states that the child allowance should not be part of minimum income, and instead be an addition to it. Furthermore, the CCSW has repeatedly recommended the need to centralise foster care and adoption services and procedures, which could bring together expertise and knowledge of these services which currently vary significantly between the local Centres for Social Work (CSW). There is also a need to introduce new custody regulations for children. Currently, custody is not linked to financial support, leading to CSWs often having to take over this role on behalf of parents. However, this often means that one individual member of staff is responsible for making decisions as the administrative body and as the custodian of the child due to the small size of the CSWs, creating a conflict of interest. Finally, there is also a need for the national government to finance more preventive social policies, which can reduce the at-risk-of-poverty rate for children.

New legislation is being introduced to improve long-term care, but a lack of places in residential care facilities for older people is a concern. In February 2017, the Law on Personal Assistance was adopted, and it will be applied from the beginning of 2019 for individuals with long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments aged 18 to 65. The local CSWs will play a significant role in its implementation, being the decision-makers on whether a user qualifies for personal assistance. Once personal assistance has been granted, the user will be free to choose a personal assistance provider. Those eligible will be entitled to services such as home care, help with daily chores, travel support, assistance in the workplace and education.

¹⁴⁵Institute for Social Protection (2016) The situation of children in Slovenia today. <http://www.irssv.si/category-list-potreben-za-bt-slider/739-objava-monografije-z-naslovom-polozaj-otrok-v-sloveniji-danes-situacijska-analiza> (last accessed 06/09/17)

Long-term care for older people is at risk, with insufficient places to accommodate older people in residential care. Urgent accommodation is provided by the state. However, facilities lack enough capacity to support all the older people who require an urgent place in care.

Modernisation is needed to support the improvement of public administration and the reorganisation of CSWs. The CSWs will be reorganised in October 2018 through the creation of 16 regional offices. The aim is to centralise common activities, whilst allowing for social work to be carried out at the local level. The CCSW has also been calling for the modernisation of administrative systems, which are outdated and cumbersome, but no action has been taken so far.

The CCSW coordinates with employment services support for long-term unemployed people, but they face some obstacles. The CCSW state that they will be collaborating with public employment services on a project to support the employment and social integration for those who have been unemployed for more than 24 months. However, representatives of the CCSW worry that too much responsibility for employment related support will be placed on then CSWs, when their expertise relates to addressing social problems. The project began on 1st of September 2017, and the CCSW continues to collaborate with the Ministry of Labour to design and deliver the project.

Spain

Unemployment continues to be an important cause of inequalities and social exclusion. Therefore, coordination between employment and social services should be strengthened by providing further training to employment services staff as well as increased coordination with social services staff. Furthermore, providing accessible and integrated support requires an increase in the number of social workers who work in employment services and providing them with appropriate training regarding case coordination and management.

In the region of Navarra, a project called 'enhancing the right to social inclusion through service integration' is being implemented with the aim to successfully integrate social and employment services to reach the most vulnerable groups of society through the provision of comprehensive support. The project is being piloted with 500 people in two municipalities thanks to EU funding¹⁴⁶. However, in general terms, coordination between employment and social services should be improved by strengthening the dialogue between the two sectors, and improving the exchange of data to improve needs assessments.

Spain's income support schemes have limited coverage and effectiveness. Only 61% of unemployed people receive income support against 80% in the EU. Fragmentation and large regional disparities in income guarantee schemes could explain their low effectiveness. To better coordinate national and regional schemes, the government has announced the introduction of a personal 'social care' register that will record all benefits granted by different public administrations.

Regarding funding, the Concerted Plan of Basic Social Services has been cut from €86.6 million in 2011 to €27 million in 2017. Moreover, the National General Council for Social Work (NGCSW) points out that the Spanish government has stopped allocating funds to top up those provided by the European Union, such as the Fund for European Aid to the most Deprived.

As the European Commission highlights, child poverty remains high mainly because of parents' employment situation and weak family support. Though declining, a high share of children (12% in 2014) still live in jobless households. The NGCSW points out that even though a national strategic plan has been put in place to reduce child poverty, statistics still show that the plan is having little impact on improving the situation of children and families facing poverty. At regional level, some initiatives have been established to fight child poverty and prevent school dropouts. Andalucía, for example, approved two key legislative measures to fight social exclusion by ensuring minimal supplies as well as emergency income support to particularly vulnerable groups¹⁴⁷.

The Youth Guarantee is being implemented but it is difficult to assess its impact. A pivotal aspect to improve the impact of the Youth Guarantee is to provide job opportunities with better conditions for young people. The Catalan Government has invested €177 million for the implementation of the Youth Guarantee Programme. The Public Employment Service of Catalonia has deployed a range of services to respond to the different profiles of young NEETs in the territory. Moreover, it has announced the creation of a youth employment working group with the participation of social partners and the Catalan Government to address youth employability, the fight against job insecurity, or youth empowerment in the workplace.

¹⁴⁶ Services for inclusion (2015) Reinforcement of the Right to Social Inclusion through Integration of Service (<http://www.sjjs.net/documentos/Path/523579.pdf>) (last accessed 01/09/2017)

¹⁴⁷ Andalusia Regional Government (2016) Orden de 24 de abril de 2016, por la que se prorrogan para el ejercicio 2016 algunas de las medidas aprobadas por el Decreto-ley 8/2014, de 10 de junio, de medidas extraordinarias y urgentes para la inclusión social a través del empleo y el fomento de la solidaridad en Andalucía [act on fostering social inclusion through employment policy]. http://www.juntadeandalucia.es/export/drupaljda/Orden_de_24_de_abril_2016.pdf (last accessed 01/09/2017)

Most of the financial burden for the provision of long-term care rests with regional authorities. The main barriers to achieve a correct implementation of the Personal Autonomy and Dependent Care law are the lack of available funds, the existence of long waiting lists, increased co-payments and the lack of a system for palliative care. Wide inequalities in access to long-term care services persist across regions, due to large disparities in the number of places available in residential facilities, the provision of services and price.

Although the government has announced an additional €75 million for the provision of long-term care, regions highlight that they bear an increasing share of expenditure. Indeed, the contribution of the Spanish government is clearly inferior to that of regional authorities. For instance, in Catalonia, the contribution of the Catalan government reached 82% in 2015. In Andalucía, the regional government's share of expenditure was 78% while the national government contributed 22%. Therefore, the contribution of the Spanish government is clearly inferior to that of regional governments, who argue that the co-financing rate should be equitable.

In 2012, the Spanish government introduced reforms that led to 170,000 informal carers (92% of whom were women) not having access to social security. In December 2016, the regional government of Andalucía joined the proposal of a State Treaty, promoted by an independent association of social services directors to support the access of formal and informal carers to social security.

Spain's housing market is improving, but many families still face housing-related indebtedness.

The latest data of the National Statistics Institute show that the number of foreclosures initiated on primary residences decreased by 30.9% between 2016 and 2017. In March 2017, the government extended measures to protect those who fell on mortgage payments during the crisis until 2020 paying more attention to vulnerable groups. At regional level, Galicia launched in 2012 the programme 'Reconduce' under which a specialised office was established to provide economic, legal, social and psychological support to people at risk or in situations of eviction.

Sweden

A lack of social and affordable housing has been exacerbated by increased demand. According to our contributor, the Swedish Association of Directors of Social Welfare Services (FSS), Swedish municipalities have struggled to accommodate vulnerable people in need of housing support, especially with the arrival of many refugees and migrants. FSS recommends a more proactive national housing policy, where local authorities share investment with housing corporations and the national government. This should focus on providing accommodation of an acceptable minimum standard and an affordable rent level, whilst enabling opportunities for integration rather than segregation, for example by providing areas with a mix of housing types and standards.

A variety of projects are in place to support migrants, but housing considerations are overlooked. Many asylum-seekers granted residency in Sweden are allocated to municipalities which lack adequate housing, and they are subsequently housed in temporary accommodation with shared facilities in crowded conditions over long periods of time.

In 2016, 22,000 migrants completed a two-year introduction programme run by the employment agency providing work or study, 33% of whom were in employment or further education after finishing the programme. There is also an important gender dimension, as 36% of men were in employment compared to 15% of women¹⁴⁸. The statistics also show remarkably large differences at municipal level, between 0 and 73% find work or study depending on the municipality. The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) believes that there is not enough support from national employment policies to enable the matching of migrants to local employers as the programmes are too focussed on a national scale, making it difficult to adapt the programme for local needs¹⁴⁹.

The possibility for migrants and refugees to fill labour shortages in the social care sector has been identified and promoted. Projects in this area have been funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) and by the County Administrative Boards (Länsstyrelse). For example, in Stockholm, the 'Språksam' project provides weekly language training to 300 migrant care assistants and nursing staff¹⁵⁰.

Social services and schools have improved their ability to help migrant children, but more needs to be done for their mental health. The improved response from social services and schools in 2016 is largely down to the greater experience they have in this area and fewer unaccompanied minors arriving in Sweden, which means that the pressure on services has been relieved.

Uncertainty regarding children's pending applications to stay in the country is a source of considerable stress. One report states that over one third of unaccompanied minors contacted youth mental health services in 2016, with waiting times for support being up to 12 months¹⁵¹.

With fewer unaccompanied minors arriving in 2016, there has been less pressure for foster care placements and social services have been able to improve the supervision of existing foster care placements, ensuring quality and safety. Also, other forms of accommodation have been developed for children as they get older. Stödboende is one example of supported accommodation. It includes some staffing support and individual apartments, it is available nationwide and commonly used by unaccompanied children aged 18 to 20 years old.

¹⁴⁸Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (2017) Restrictive rules hinder job uptake. https://skl.se/5.2ced2eb215cc46662caee064.html?utm_source=notifiering&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=press (last accessed 31/07/2017)

¹⁴⁹Ibid

¹⁵⁰Swedish ESF Council (2017) Språksam. <http://www.esf.se/en/Resultat/Projektbanken/Behallare-for-projekt/Stockholm/SprakSam/> (last accessed 31/07/2017)

¹⁵¹Swedish Television (2017) Unaccompanied minors. <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/helsingborg/ensamkommande-1> (last accessed 31/07/2017)

Investment has supported the development of mental health services. The 2017 financial agreement between the Government and SALAR is called Mission Mental Health (Uppdrag Psykisk Hälsa)¹⁵² and is worth €93 million¹⁵³. The agreement is intended to analyse local and regional mental health challenges as well as providing support to meet these challenges in the short and long-term, including the availability of high-quality and cost-effective interventions for those who need care and support. It builds on earlier agreements from 2012 to 2016 where €89 million¹⁵⁴ was spent each year on mental health, mostly provided to municipalities that developed mental health tools and strategies to be put in place in schools, social services and healthcare services.

This broad investment in promoting and developing mental health services has helped raise awareness and quality, but there are still concerns about a lack of suitable qualified staff and widespread regional differences according to FSS.

Indications suggest the 90-day guarantee has been effective in supporting young people's employment. The 90-day guarantee states that all young unemployed people should receive support which leads to a job or education before reaching 90 days of unemployment. Of 51,831 young people who qualified for the 90-day guarantee¹⁵⁵ in 2016, 25,894 were in employment after the 90-day period¹⁵⁶. Furthermore, in March 2017, 122,200 young people between the ages of 15-24 were unemployed, 22,100 less than in March 2016¹⁵⁷.

Stricter interpretation of eligibility for financial and personal support has affected the wellbeing of persons with disabilities. The Social Insurance Agency (Försäkringskassan) has been much more restrictive in their interpretation of the law regulating support and services for persons with disabilities when making decisions about their financial and personal support. This has led to falling living standards and mobility for persons with disabilities, in addition to increased demands placed on municipalities to provide additional forms of care.

¹⁵²Mission Mental Health (2017) [Uppdrag Psykisk Hälsa] The Mental Health Agreement. <https://www.uppdragpsykiskhalsa.se/om-oss/overenskommelsen-for-psykisk-halsa-2017/> (last accessed 31/07/2017)

¹⁵³SEK 885 million.

¹⁵⁴SEK 850 million

¹⁵⁵The 90-day guarantee aims to ensure all young people under the age of 25 and registered with the public employment service receive either a job offer, support leading to a job or an education within 90 days.

¹⁵⁶The Public Employment Service (2016) Annual Report. <https://www.arbetsformedlingen.se/Om-oss/Statistik-och-publikationer/Rapporter/Arssrapporter-arbetsmarknadspolitiska-program.html> (last accessed 31/07/2017)

¹⁵⁷Ekonomifakta (2017) Youth Unemployment. <http://www.ekonomifakta.se/Fakta/Arbetsmarknad/Arbetsloshet/Ungdomsarbetsloshet-per-manad/> (last accessed 31/07/2017)

United Kingdom

Housing affordability is a severe problem, with local authorities hindered in their ability to react. It is a problem particularly affecting younger people, with the average age of a first-time buyer now 37 for those who do not benefit from their parents' financial support. The construction of social housing increased in 2017 with some local authorities continuing to pursue home building schemes, but more is required. However, there are significant barriers to local authorities' ability to construct homes, not least the 'right to buy'¹⁵⁸ legislation, which means that local authorities do not have security of income from rent over the long-term, from which to finance construction.

Social services do not have the capacity to tackle persistent youth unemployment. The Scottish contributor from Renfrewshire Council and Social Work Scotland highlights that despite a considerable fall in youth unemployment to 8.8% for 16 to 24-year olds, the rate remains more than double than the rate for the population as a whole, which stands at 3.8%¹⁵⁹. The contributor from the English Association of Directors of Adult Social Services, (ADASS), argues that a lack of specific funding for local authorities to support NEETs prevents meaningful action to ensure all young people are in education, training or employment.

However, there is great potential for local authorities to provide effective support to young people, demonstrated by successful initiatives such as specific work-entry routes for looked after children either through ring-fenced apprenticeships, preparation for working life schemes, or specific grant schemes. This is exemplified by the example of Leeds City Council where services for care leavers have seen significant investment. Personal pathway plans are developed for those who become NEETs, care leavers are included in apprenticeship schemes with the local authority, and their participation in further education is encouraged. Data indicates that 57% of care leavers in Leeds are in education, employment and training, above the national average for this group which stands at 45%.

¹⁵⁸Policy which allows social housing tenants to purchase and own their property from the council.

¹⁵⁹Office for National Statistics (2017) youth unemployment rate in Scotland, February – April 2017.

Scotland is pursuing an integrated health and social care strategy, but funding cuts restrict local authorities' ability to provide care. The integration of adult health and social care is the principal policy strategy in Scotland. Integration Joint Boards and Health and Social Care Partnerships have been fully operational for one year, following a transition period. It is too early to assess their impact; however, there is broad agreement that integration is key for supporting early intervention and preventative services, which can reduce the pressure on care services.

The English contributor from ADASS highlights the combined challenge of budgetary restraint and increased demand which has had significant implications for the financial sustainability of social care and placed extra pressure on the National Health Service (NHS) which has had to take on additional responsibilities that otherwise were dealt with by social services in local authorities. An extra £2 billion in emergency funding¹⁶⁰ for adult social care means little within the wider context of the living wage increases, existing overspends, and the investment needed to stabilise care provision. A long-term plan which defines the balance of financing between an individual and the state for care provision is yet to be agreed, but initial work has started on this.

Plans are in place to increase the availability of free childcare, but there are obstacles to its implementation. Scotland is working towards delivering 1,140 hours of free childcare for every three and four-year old, plus eligible two-year olds by 2020. Similarly, in England, 30 hours of free childcare for all three and four-year olds was introduced in September 2017.

¹⁶⁰Department for Communities and Local Government (2017) At the Spring Budget 2017, the government announced that an additional £2 billion will be given to councils in England over the next 3 years for adult social care. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/598252/EN_FINAL.pdf (last accessed 31/07/2017)

However, this policy is hindered by concerns regarding the ability for the current market to adapt to this new policy¹⁶¹. On top of this, ongoing budget cuts to local authorities have weakened the national children's centre network, which provides targeted childcare and parenting support. Across both countries, strong progress has been made by local authorities to extend the provision of free childcare to disadvantaged two-year olds.

The level of support given to refugees varies by local authority, and support is reduced when children reach adulthood. Local authorities continue to provide good support to integrate unaccompanied children, but the numbers supported vary significantly by local authority. More worryingly, funding from national government falls significantly when young unaccompanied asylum-seekers reach 18-years old, and some find they are not given the possibility to stay in the country and lose any support from public services. However, in Scotland, regulation requires local authorities to support formerly looked after children, including unaccompanied children, until their 26th birthday.

Government funding to facilitate the integration of Syrian refugees has enabled a programme of support to be developed with local authorities. The programme supports refugees by giving them access to education, healthcare, social care and, where possible, employment. By June 2016, 2,659 refugees were resettled in the UK through the programme, 13% of the 20,000 target to be reached in 2020.

More action is needed to support the social inclusion of people with disabilities. Persons with disabilities in Scotland stated that their top three barriers to employment were their disability (45%), a lack of job opportunities (43%), difficulty with transport (29%) and the attitudes of employers (20%)¹⁶². To better support persons with disabilities' employment, a study¹⁶³ found that building modifications, job coaches or personal assistants, flexible work patterns and additional managerial support were all effective measures that could be put in place. According to the initiative 'A Fairer Scotland for Disabled People', the Scottish Government plans to improve access to educational and employment opportunities to persons with disabilities, including apprenticeships. Promoting personalised support for people with disabilities in finding employment is one of the priorities of the ADASS President for this year, underlining the need for more action.

According to the English contributor, a new national commitment to make employment more accessible to people with disabilities is needed, including funding for ongoing job support and mentoring.

New initiatives aim to provide further support to carers, but more remains to be done. In England, Employment for Carers is a national programme formed by a group of 130 employer organisations, covering 1.25 million employees, with the objective of ensuring that employers can retain and support employees with caring responsibilities. It is estimated that 140,000 working carers are represented. Meanwhile in Scotland, new legislation within the Carers Act will entitle carers to a support plan, which identifies their personal needs. Local authorities will also be obliged to provide information and advice service to carers covering issues, such as advocacy, income maximisation, emergency and future care planning and carers' rights.

¹⁶¹Localis (2017) "Childcare providers have raised many concerns about the allocated funding levels for government's extension of free childcare." <http://www.localis.org.uk/research/targeting-affordable-childcare/> (last accessed 31/07/2017)

¹⁶²Scottish Government (2013) Equality Outcomes: Disability Evidence Review. <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2013/04/4875> (last accessed 31/07/2017)

¹⁶³ODI (2011) Life Opportunities Survey. <https://goo.gl/tMpTZ4> (last accessed 31/07/2017)

Proposed Country-Specific Recommendations for 2018

Table 4.

Country	Proposed Recommendation	Rationale
Austria	Tackle poverty by introducing legislation which harmonises means-tested benefits, enact a statutory minimum wage of €1,500 to €1,700, and improve the adequacy of pensions.	In 2017, 18.5% of Austria's population are categorised as poor, outside of the labour market, or at-risk-of poverty; 17% are in low-paid employment; 7% are poor but in employment; and 408,000 children and youth are at risk of poverty.
Belgium	Belgium must ensure everyone has access to affordable and good quality housing.	There is an enormous lack of affordable and good quality housing. Local social services devote a lot of time and energy finding suitable housing for vulnerable people, at the expense of other social services and support.
Bulgaria	Measures to fight long-term unemployment must be better monitored by the European Commission.	In previous years significant funding has been allocated for such measures but the number of long-term unemployed remains high and no significant change in their situation has been observed.
Czech Republic	Unify children's services under one ministry, introduce legislation to strengthen the transition from residential care facilities to community-based care, improve the regional availability of children's services and divert funds from institutional care to preventative services for families and children.	The fragmentation of children's services between three ministries, the continued operation of high-capacity residential facilities for children and the absence of regulations for the placement of pre-school children in collective care are significant problems in the Czech Republic.
Denmark	Address growing inequality, particularly for young people and people on low income.	A substantial number of young people are excluded from the labour market and lack academic qualifications. Moreover, young people are increasingly reporting mental health problems. Also, a significant number of people are living in poverty with the new benefits ceiling not helping their situation.
Finland	There is a need for strong political leadership to support the reform of social and health services to ensure that the objectives are met.	Large-scale reforms require political stability and consensus because changes need to be implemented over a long period of time beyond one political term.
France	It is key to reduce housing costs and to increase housing supply.	The construction of housing in France has been widely insufficient over the past decades. As a result, housing prices in metropolitan areas have dramatically increased leading to growing social inequalities.
Germany	The support provided by the German government to low wage earners should focus on subsidising their contribution to the social insurance system and not on tax reduction.	Tax reduction mainly benefits people with high and middle income but not low-income persons and families, who usually already pay little tax.
Hungary	Hungary should review its Public Work Schemes because these measures do not improve labour market outcomes and create a permanent under-class of unskilled workers.	Official employment figures remain highly distorted due to Public Work Schemes. Further improvement on the labour market is unlikely to occur without tackling the increasing labour shortage and reforming the country's education and training system.
Ireland	Increase the stock of social housing, decrease the reliance on the private rented sector for the provision of social housing, and increase the variety of tenure type for those at risk of housing exclusion.	Housing exclusion in Ireland is growing, demonstrated by rising homelessness. Current strategies to address this do not go far enough.

Italy	Ensure that the coordination of social and health services is supported uniformly across the country by improving coordination of all levels of governance and distributing more evenly the budget between social and health policies.	The Law on the integration of services has not succeeded in overcoming the diversity of service provision in the country. Regional governance levels are still fragmented and there is a predominance of health over social expenditure. Moreover, due to social budget cuts, social services can only meet emergencies, but cannot cover the cost of prevention, which makes the integration of services even more difficult.
Latvia	Ensure that equal access to social services and social assistance are guaranteed throughout the country through better redistribution of finances between municipalities.	Many competencies in the social sector have been transferred from the national to the municipal level. Adequate funding did not follow the transfer of competencies, hindering the right of access to social services and social assistance for Latvian citizens living in poorer municipalities.
Lithuania	More rigorous evaluation mechanisms must be set-up to independently evaluate the effectiveness of social programmes and projects.	Lithuania is currently undertaking many reforms and transition programmes, particularly to deinstitutionalise care and provide social housing. It is imperative that the appropriateness and success of these programmes can be measured and assessed.
The Netherlands	The national government must recognise the complexity of the refugee crisis, and develop tailored programmes to match the different needs and backgrounds of migrants who come to the Netherlands to ensure their integration in society.	Refugees fleeing war and persecution require have often had traumatic experiences and require different support to economic migrants, and often have traumatic experiences. Likewise, unaccompanied migrant children require different levels of support compared to refugee families. The needs of different migrants must be effectively assessed and met.
Poland	It is necessary to further develop social services to reach particularly vulnerable groups of society. In this sense, it is key to reform social services professions, making them more attractive, and increase job retention.	This reform would allow social services to be more proactive in providing help to those more in need.
Portugal	It is crucial to increase the level of social investment and social protection as well as develop more inclusive social services.	This is necessary in order to create a comprehensive strategy against poverty and social exclusion, which remains Portugal's biggest issue.
Romania	Reinforce training for professionals working in public and private social services, hiring more social workers, promoting workforce participation in the creation of new approaches, investing in long-term learning and enhancing transparency mechanisms both top-down and bottom-up.	At present, the capacity of local authorities to employ and retain professional social workers in the community-based social services is low. The setting up of a minimum package of social work services combined with the integrative approach in the provision of community-based services as a mandatory responsibility for each public administration is key to reduce poverty.
Slovenia	Efforts to support the employment of people outside the labour market must include social considerations in addition to activation measures.	Not enough recognition is given to the ability of social services to help people outside the labour market address their needs to meet the requirements of the labour market.
Spain	Coordination between employment and social services should be enhanced by increasing the social services workforce in the two sectors.	Due to the lack of social workers in both employment and social services, needs are not being assessed in a holistic way.
Sweden	To address housing exclusion, a more equitable distribution of housing is needed across the country instead of a concentration in the larger cities, and action taken to address the affordability of housing.	Availability of affordable properties, particularly in urban areas, is extremely low and this excludes groups such as young people, migrants and low-income families from the housing market.
United Kingdom	Take urgent action to improve housing supply and address affordability issues.	Housing remains a key issue for the United Kingdom. Issues include rising homelessness, a lack of rent control (affordable rent), an under-supply of new build homes and housing for vulnerable groups, for example care leavers.

5. Conclusions

The members of the European Social Network (ESN)'s European Semester Reference Group bring their expertise and knowledge from the local level to ensure implementation of key European initiatives, such as the European Commission's Country-specific Recommendations (CSRs) and the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) principles. Holding senior and directorship positions, many are undertaking reforms to improve the delivery of social policies, but still make time to contribute to the Group by analysing policies at national and European levels and participating at the Group's annual meeting.

Directors of social services manage a considerable amount of money and, thanks to their position, they understand perfectly the difficulties of achieving positive outcomes from social policies. Consulting them is key and it is important that the European level recognises the fact that the national level does not always adequately address problems faced at the local level. Therefore, this dialogue we aim to create with ESN's Reference Group on the Semester and the European Commission is crucial to ensure a two-fold objective. First, that European social policies are well informed of the issues affecting those on the ground; and second to engage with local citizens to secure policy implementation.

There are several recurring themes that have emerged when analysing the countries presented in this report, regardless of their social welfare systems:

- ✓ The significant impact of the financial crisis on how social services are being managed and how social policy is being implemented;
- ✓ The integration of health and social care for older people;
- ✓ The development of community-based services across the life cycle and its implications for new ways of working in social services;
- ✓ The promotion of inclusive policies for those people more in need, such as the long-term unemployed, people with disabilities or people with mental health problems, and refugees;
- ✓ The implementation of administrative reforms across Europe, whether decentralising service provision or addressing overlaps and recentralising certain services.

These issues do not appear in isolation and are greatly interlinked. For instance, the fallout from the financial crisis remains significant for several countries. Where this is the case, the consequences for social services are not only serious but enduring, impacting families and vulnerable groups across the board. Tensions between national, regional and local administrations and systems continue in many - if not all - states. Restructuring, but mostly according to fiscal priorities, appears to dominate many strategies.

The impact of the crisis is still reverberating on employment. Clearly, youth unemployment and long-term unemployment are a cause for considerable concern across most -if not all- Member States. Still many contributors to the report highlight the issue of how 'activation' has become the norm, which has an impact on how active inclusion policies and employment and social services are configured. The report findings suggest the need for more holistic social inclusion strategies that aim not only at including people in the labour market but at improving people's overall quality of life.

Housing exclusion has been increasingly referred to as a prominent issue. Problems related to housing are no longer limited to the most vulnerable groups, and increasingly concern more people from middle classes. With many urban areas identified as unaffordable and with limitations in the social housing sector including overall stock, this is clearly a central theme that will be salient across the Member States in years to come.

The refugee crisis and its impact on public services represents a major issue for several countries over the past year. There seems to be a will in many places to try to provide the best care, support and training to promote refugees' social integration. However, against a backdrop of strained resources, it is certainly a major challenge to go forwards in terms of coordinated service provision and social integration.

Moving forward, all the countries represented agreed the need for future Commission recommendations on reinforcing the coordination between employers, employment and social services to better support active inclusion. Ensuring, and drawing upon, evidence and evaluation across the whole social sector and throughout local, regional and national levels was also highlighted as a priority for all. All participants highlighted the role of EU funds in supporting community-care, the creation of new social services and support for the implementation of social inclusion strategies for specific populations, such as the Roma or refugees. However, they also emphasised that the EU places too much focus on outputs rather than actual outcomes, which often leads to poor implementation.

This year's debate has taken place when the European Commission is seeking national endorsement of the EPSR. Members of the Group highlighted the need to clarify the concepts and rights of the EPSR, so that there is a common understanding between all EU countries. They also felt that migrants should be included within the EPSR, recognising the significant investment into their integration across Europe. When it comes to work-life balance, the Group recommended more emphasis should be placed on creating good conditions for the upbringing and development of children, rather than just focusing on childcare and employability.

As suggested by ESN in its response to the EPSR consultation in 2016, the EPSR should recognise public authorities' duty of care towards the individual throughout the life-course to ensure that its social protection principles resonate with local statutory duties and local communities feel that the Pillar is relevant for them. If the principles contained in the Pillar are to be implemented, it is important that countries receive specific guidance and recommendations on how to do so. Finally, integrating the Pillar into the European Semester cycle offers an opportunity to focus on social issues, and for social services to lead by example through the implementation of decisions that reflect the principles put forward by the Pillar.

6. Annex: Key topics and trends between 2014 and 2016

Mind the gap: Key topics and trends between 2014 and 2016

Over the course of ESN's work on the European Semester since 2014, ESN's Reference Group has identified several key themes and priorities to be taken into account by the European Commission in the framework of the European Semester, including:

- Fiscal consolidation and the impact on public social services;
- Administrative reforms;
- Financing of social services;
- Labour market inclusion and activation;
- Poverty and social exclusion;
- Childcare;
- The development of community-based services;
- The social integration of migrants and refugees;
- Homelessness and housing exclusion;
- The role of EU funds.

Furthermore, the Reference Group has reflected on the adequacy of European Commission's Semester documents, such as the country reports and the Country-specific Recommendations, identifying priorities and proposing their own alternative country-specific recommendations.

In this annex to the report, we analyse progress made by Member States on the key themes and trends emerging from the three ESN Semester reports published between 2014 and 2016. Furthermore, we will try to analyse the extent to which the topics identified are linked to recent EU initiatives in the field of social affairs and inclusion, notably the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). In order to do so, we have decided to focus on six topics, which are common to the three previous reports:

- 1) Administrative reforms;
- 2) Labour market integration and activation;
- 3) Poverty and social exclusion;
- 4) Childcare;
- 5) Development of community-based services;
- 6) Homelessness and housing exclusion

6.1 Administrative reforms

Over time, ESN members have identified several key themes related to administrative reforms, which have either been implemented or are ongoing in their countries. Firstly, addressing the ‘vertical dimension’ of governance, the distribution of competences in social policy between the various levels of government and the coordination between these levels have been identified as key challenges. In most cases, reforms have led to an unclear distribution of competences, with overlaps in service provision between the different levels of governance, leading to services duplication. Second, concerns have been expressed as to the attribution of responsibilities for funding social services, in a context often characterised by fiscal consolidation policies, with social services often facing increasing responsibilities without enough financial support from the national level.

With regard to the ‘horizontal dimension’ of governance, two issues are particularly interesting. To start with, a number of reforms have been geared to the integration of social and healthcare services. However, this process has proved particularly challenging in many countries. Furthermore, an increasing number of responsibilities in social service provision are being outsourced to civil society organisations. In some cases, this is a consequence of cuts to the public budget, and social NGOs are not always provided with enough financial resources to fulfil their new tasks. The Reference Group has also identified challenges related to staff management and territorial disparities in the provision and quality of social services.

Overall, looking at trends over the last three years (Table 5), the picture is not particularly bright. Some examples of controversial administrative reforms have been provided by members in Belgium, Finland and France. In Belgium, the 6th state reform has led to difficulties in coordinating social service provisions. In France, administrative reforms have not solved the challenge of overlaps between services run by the various levels of government. In Finland, the much debated ‘Freedom of choice’ reform may result in increasing inequalities between regions.

Table 5. Administrative reforms: integration of health and social care

Country/year	2015	2016	2017
BE	↓	↓	↔
CZ	↓	n.a.	↔
FI	↓	↓	n.a.
FR	↓	↓	↓
IT	↔	↔	n.a.
LT	↓	↑	n.a.
PL	↓	n.a.	↓
PT	↓	↓	↔
RO	↔	↔	↓

Source: authors’ elaboration from ESN Semester reports 2015, 2016, and 2017.

Note: ↑ positive developments; ↔ mixed developments; ↓ negative developments; n.a.: no information.

6.2 Labour market integration

The integration of the most vulnerable into the labour market and activation measures have been at the core of reforms implemented in EU countries over the last years. In this area, a number of key themes have been identified by the Reference Group. First, the importance of – and the challenges related to – cooperation between employment and social services, particularly important when it comes to the labour market integration of the most vulnerable groups.

Second, an excessive focus on activation policies, deemed not always sufficient for the labour market integration of the most vulnerable groups in society. The difficult situation of the long-term unemployed has often been referred to. More generally, supply-side measures appear insufficient: more attention should be devoted to demand-side measures and to the quality and sustainability of jobs created.

Third, the Reference Group questions the usefulness of negative labour market incentives, such as the reduction of social benefits or tightening of the criteria to access these to incentivise people into employment.

Finally, with regards to the governance of labour integration policies, an increasingly important role is played by social NGOs. Here again, however, difficulties have emerged in coordinating their actions with public authorities.

When it comes to trends in labour integration policies (Table 6), a mixed situation emerges, with some countries experiencing improvements but not in others. This mixed picture is particularly evident in relation to the issue of integration of employment and social services.

Looking at the most recent EU initiatives in the field of labour market inclusion, it should be noted that ‘active support to employment is among the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). According to this principle, everyone has the right to timely and tailor-made assistance to improve employment or self-employment prospects, with particular attention to be paid to young people and the long-term unemployed.

Table 6. Labour market integration and activation

Country/year	2015	2016	2017
BE	↓	n.a.	↓
BG	↔	↓	↑
CZ	n.a.	↓	↑
ES	↓	↓	n.a.
FI	n.a.	↑	↔
FR	↔	n.a.	↓
LV	↓	↓	n.a.
PL	↑	↑	↔

Source: authors' elaboration from ESN Semester reports 2015, 2016, and 2017.

Note: ↑ positive developments; ↔ mixed developments; ↓ negative developments; n.a.: no information.

6.3 Poverty and social exclusion

Although, in recent times, the economy and the employment situation have been slowly recovering in most Member States, addressing poverty and social exclusion is still a key challenge for social services, and has been addressed in each of the ESN Semester reports published over the last three years. A number of key issues have been identified by ESN members.

First, the lack of comprehensive social inclusion strategies and shortcomings or delays in drafting and implementing social inclusion strategies in several countries.

Second, insufficient attention paid to the issue of rising inequalities, and a tendency to adopt a narrow understanding of social inclusion, sometimes interpreted exclusively as labour market inclusion.

Finally, the important role of the European Structural Funds, especially the ESF, in promoting social inclusion policies and experimentation, such as Roma integration projects in Bulgaria and the Czech Republic, DI or community-based care in most CEEC, and refugees' social inclusion in most EU countries.

Furthermore, the Reference Group has identified a number of social groups particularly at risk of poverty or social exclusion and in need of targeted policies: older people, children, immigrants, the long-term unemployed, and people with disabilities.

In the EPSR, wages (principle 6), minimum income (principle 14), old age income and pensions (principle 15), and the inclusion of people with disabilities (principle 17) are some key principles put forward by the Commission.

Looking at the few countries for which we have detailed information (Table 7), it appears the situation has improved since 2015, but there is room for more progree. While social services had remarkable difficulties in addressing the challenge of poverty and social inclusion in 2015, an increasing number of initiatives has been implemented over time.

Table 7. Poverty and social exclusion

Country/year	2015	2016	2017
BE	↓	↑	↓
BG	n.a.	↑	↔
CZ	↓	n.a.	↓
DE	↓	↑	↔
DK	↓	↑	n.a.
IE	↓	n.a.	n.a.
PT	↓	↑	↔

Source: authors' elaboration from ESN Semester reports 2015, 2016, and 2017.

Note: ↑ positive developments; ↔ mixed developments; ↓ negative developments; n.a.: no information.

6.4 Homelessness and housing exclusion

The situation regarding homelessness and housing exclusion is worrying. Key challenges identified by the Reference Group are: a) growing costs of housing; b) a shortage of social housing; and c) evictions. Importantly, housing problems are not limited to the most vulnerable groups, but increasingly concern people from the middle classes, due to high prices and a shortage of housing in some countries. This said, the situation appears particularly difficult for some social groups, such as young people, low-income families, and immigrants.

The main message from the Reference Group is that more active government housing policies are needed, in collaboration with local authorities and the private housing development sector. On a positive note, Housing First programmes, revolving around the provision of accommodation first linked with additional support, implemented in a number of Member States, such as Denmark, are proving successful to support homeless people and those at risk of homelessness.

Housing and assistance for homelessness (principle 19) is among the principles of the EPSR. This principle addresses the key themes identified by the Reference Group, including access to social housing, appropriate assistance and protection against eviction for vulnerable people, and adequate shelter and services for the homeless.

As shown by Table 8, trends regarding housing exclusion and homelessness are clearly negative.

Table 8. Homelessness and housing exclusion

Country/year	2015	2016	2017
BE	n.a.	↓	↓
DK	↔	↔	↓
ES	n.a.	↓	↑
FR	↓	↓	↓
IE	↓	↓	↓
SE	↓	↓	↓
UK	n.a.	↓	↓

Source: authors' elaboration from ESN Semester reports 2015, 2016, and 2017.

Note: ↑ positive developments; ↔ mixed developments; ↓ negative developments; n.a.: no information.

6.5 Childcare and children's services

The issue of childcare and children's services has featured prominently in ESN reports published over the last three years. Although the importance of childcare in promoting children's development, preventing the inheritance of social disadvantages, and facilitating parents' access to the labour market is widely recognised, developments in this policy domain vary across the Member States. A number of challenges to be addressed have been identified by ESN members.

First, the availability and quality of childcare services. Second, their affordability, with the cost of accessing childcare rising in some Member States. Third, access for children with disadvantaged backgrounds who would need care from trained specialised staff. Fourth, cross-country variation in the age groups covered by childcare. Fifth, the public-private mix of the childcare facilities on offer. Finally, the relation to legislation on parental leave. Furthermore, in some countries, progress in children's policies is hindered by the existence of institutional obstacles such as fragmentation of responsibilities and lack of coordination. This is, for instance, the case in the Czech Republic, where the development of ECEC is limited due to the fragmented distribution of competency for children's education, with the Ministry of Education responsible for children aged between three and six, and no Ministry primarily responsible for younger children. In several countries, the ESF plays a key role in supporting childcare and measures targeted at children, such as community-based children's services.

The EPSR put forward a series of principles related to this area, such as work-life Balance (principle 9), and childcare and support for children (principle 11). According to principle 11, children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality, and to protection from poverty (with specific measures to enhance equal opportunities foreseen for children with disadvantaged backgrounds).

As can be seen in Table 9, no clear trends emerge for this policy area.

Table 9. Childcare and children's services

Country/year	2015	2016	2017
BE	↓	↓	n.a.
CZ	↑	↓	↔
EE	↑	↔	n.a.
IE	↓	↑	↑
PL	↔	↑	↓

Source: authors' elaboration from ESN Semester reports 2015, 2016, and 2017.

Note: ↑ positive developments; ↔ mixed developments; ↓ negative developments; n.a.: no information.

6.6 Development of community-based services

A common, although slow trend can be identified towards deinstitutionalisation and the development of community-based services. This said, obstacles to this have been detected by the Reference Group.

First, the inadequacy of financial resources devoted to community-based services, especially in contexts characterised by fiscal consolidation. Second, difficulties in coordinating the actions of the various services involved. Third, issues concerning the availability and quality of community based services, with significant territorial differences in some Member States. Finally, the need for adequate training of carers and caring staff. Importantly, the Reference Group has stressed the need to adopt comprehensive deinstitutionalisation strategies based on a life-cycle approach covering the needs of children, people with disabilities and older people. In this respect, progress has especially been made with regards to children, while the situation of people with disabilities and people with severe mental health problems is challenging.

In the EPSR, principle 18 states that everyone has the right to affordable long-term care services of good quality, in particular home-care and community-based services.

As mentioned above, an overall positive trend emerges with regards to deinstitutionalisation and the development of community based services (Table 10). A number of Central and Eastern European countries are at the forefront of this improvement having had to implement strategies to close large-scale institutions in the past years to comply with EU Structural Funds regulations.

Table 10. Development of community-based services

Country/year	2015	2016	2017
BG	↑	↔	↑
CZ	↓	↔	↑
EE	↑	↑	n.a.
FI	↑	↑	n.a.
FR	↑	n.a.	↑
LT	↑	↑	↑
LV	↔	↔	↑
PT	n.a.	↓	↔

Source: authors' elaboration from ESN Semester reports 2015, 2016, and 2017.

Note: ↑ positive developments; ↔ mixed developments; ↓ negative developments; n.a.: no information.

7. European Commission's 2016/2017 Country-Specific Recommendations

	Health and/or social care	Childcare	Active labour market	Wage setting	Education	Skills and lifelong learning	Poverty & social inclusion	Social assistance and benefits	Public administration	Housing
AT	2016				2016			2016		
BE			2016	2016	2016	2016				
BG	2016		2016	2016			2016	2016		
CZ	2016		2016					2016	2016	
DE			2016							
DK										
ES	2016	2016	2016				2016	2016		
FI	2016		2016	2016		2016			2016	
FR	2016		2016	2016	2016	2016			2016	2016
HU			2016		2016		2016	2016		2016
IE	2016	2016	2016		2016		2016	2016		2016
IT	2016		2016				2016		2016	
LT	2016		2016		2016			2016		
LV	2016		2016		2016	2016		2016		
NL						2016		2016		2016
PL			2016		2016	2016		2016		
PT	2016		2016	2016			2016		2016	
RO	2016		2016	2016	2016		2016	2016		
SE										
SI	2016		2016			2016				2016
UK		2016				2016				2016

Key:



2016

2017

No issue

This table presents the challenges identified by the European Commission's CSRs during the European Semester in 2016 & 2017. We have highlighted the issues of particular interest to ESN's work.

This table presents the challenges identified by the European Commission during the European Semester 2016/2017

Notes

This image shows a full page of blank, lined paper. It features approximately 30 horizontal blue lines spaced evenly across the page, typical of notebook or composition paper. The lines are thin and light blue, set against a plain white background. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the page.

The European Social Network (ESN) is the independent network for local public social services in Europe. It brings together people who plan, finance, research, manage, regulate and deliver local public social services, including health, social welfare, employment, education and housing. We support the development of effective social policy and social care practice through the exchange of knowledge and experience.

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