QUALITY SOCIAL SERVICES FOR ALL

Social Platform position on an EU strategy to develop a resilient ecosystem for social services and implement the European Pillar of Social Rights during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond

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KEY MESSAGES

1. The EU and Member States should: Create an EU strategy for social services to support Member States in developing a resilient ecosystem for social services, which maximises their support to enable all people to lead dignified lives and reach their full potential.

2. Facilitate the development and promotion of ambitious common quality standards on social services, rooted in a human rights-based approach, with a strong focus on social justice and equality in the crucial aspects of their accessibility, affordability, adequacy and coverage.

3. Create the right public funding and investment conditions for social services by using and adapting all available EU instruments that impact such conditions. Make relevant funds from the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and Next Generation EU accessible to not-for-profit social service providers and encourage Member States to use them extensively to fully implement the European Pillar of Social Rights.

4. Unlock the job creation potential of the social services care sector across Europe by improving the attractiveness of jobs, working conditions, wages, up- and re-skilling, health and safety, collective bargaining and better career paths. Improve the recognition of formal and informal care work.

5. Support digitalisation of social services, while making sure that negative side effects, including the digital divide and digital poverty, are tackled. Special attention needs to be given to accessibility, both digitally and face-to-face, and to the overall quality of services, as well as to ensuring that digitalisation helps improve the quality of jobs and outreach in the sector.

Introduction

Europe is one of the most prosperous regions in the world. People living in the European Union enjoy some of the best living and working conditions and the most comprehensive

New impetus was given to the EU's social agenda in November 2017 when the Council of the European Union, the European Parliament and the European Commission jointly proclaimed the European Pillar of Social Rights (Social Pillar), which establishes 20 principles as a compass for a more social Europe. Delivering successfully on the Social Pillar will depend to a large extent on the provision of quality social services. Social services are key to making the rights and principles enshrined in the Social Pillar a reality for everyone living in the EU. The urgency to act is being accelerated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which is putting social services under significant pressure, as increasing numbers of people with support needs, coupled with governmental measures, are making it more difficult to deliver and access social services.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has provoked increased public recognition of the importance of social services for all, and particularly for people in vulnerable situations, while at the same time highlighting the danger that can come from outdated and isolating forms of care and the inability of these services to respect people's rights and protect them. This was largely due to the ability of many not-for-profit social service providers to adapt rapidly to the public health pandemic; often without initial and adequate support from public authorities. This being said, the pandemic also emphasised the importance of investment in community-based services, which were shown to be better placed to keep people safe and avoid the risk of complete isolation. Nevertheless, the crisis is exacerbating existing structural challenges such as poor coverage, low affordability, insufficient quality, underfunding and staff shortages, as well as the existence of outdated and segregated forms of care in which the potential to prevent widespread infection proved to be extremely difficult. More needs to be done to build the resilience of public and not-for-profit social services and support their ability to adequately respond to the increase in demand and specific needs brought about by the pandemic. Many of these social service providers are currently experiencing loss of revenue, while having increased expenses, facing increased numbers of beneficiaries and demand, and needing more staff and protective equipment.[1] Others are facing partial closure, making it close to impossible to provide support and continue to recruit and retain staff and pay other expenditures. These structural challenges and vulnerability of the social services sector are putting at risk the continuity and sustainability of care and support across Europe.[2] It has also left people with reduced, adapted or no access to the services, resources, protection and support they need to be fully included and able to participate in society. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of not-for-profit community-based and public social services, which build on their existing strong ties to children, families and local communities, allowing them to respond rapidly and effectively to the needs of their beneficiaries. To do this successfully, they need the right ecosystem; which means to be properly funded, to have a sufficient and well-trained workforce, to support the social entrepreneurs who run the not-for-profit providers and to enable social innovation and rapid social interventions.

Social Platform and our members call for an EU strategy for social services, with more support for and higher recognition of social services through measures outlined in this position paper. We

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[1] EASPD (2020): 2nd EASPD Snapshot Report – The Impact of COVID-19 on Disability Services in Europe
[2] See for example ibid. and Eurodiaconia (2021) The Future of Social Services. Report of the High-Level Group on Social Services

consider social services to be essential for the good functioning of our societies. Social services should be treated equally to other essential services, such as healthcare, housing, and education, and must be an integral part of the implementation of Social Pillar Principle 20 (access to essential services), recognising the intersection with other principles of the Pillar as outlined below.

With the ongoing economic and social crisis likely to continue in the months and years ahead, the need for quality social services to mitigate the effects of the crisis and support a quick recovery is continuing to increase, and probably even more significantly than before the pandemic. It is crucial to build-up the continuity, sustainability and resilience of social service provision and further develop high quality, affordable and accessible social services across the EU.

Therefore, we advocate for the development of an EU strategy for social services that supports Member States to develop a resilient ecosystem for social services, which maximises their support to enable all people to lead dignified lives and reach their full potential (I); common quality standards should be further developed and promoted (II). Strict austerity measures like those taken in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008, where funds for many essential services were cut, must be avoided this time to allow for a quick recovery for all. Instead, investment in high quality and crisis-proof social services should be a priority. Only if social investment is increased as well as protected from cuts and social service providers receive the support and financial means they need, high quality services will be able to empower people and ensure that no one is left behind. This includes making relevant funds from the MFF and Next Generation EU easily accessible for investment in quality and affordable social services and to social service providers (III). Working conditions and attractiveness of jobs in social services need to be improved (IV). Digitalisation has significantly increased during the pandemic and needs to be supported, while ensuring that negative side effects such as the digital divide are contained and accessibility and quality are guaranteed (V).

What are social services?

There is no common European definition of the term "social services". For statistical and research purposes, the Statistical Classification of Economic Activities in the European Community (NACE) (namely NACE 87 and 88) can be very useful, but only covers parts of what we understand as social services. Therefore, Social Platform and our members have agreed on the following common understanding:

By social services, we understand services supporting all people, but especially persons in vulnerable situations, to participate fully in society. They can be provided by public or private for-profit and/or not-for-profit entities. They include a wide range of care and support services over the entire lifespan of persons, from early childhood to older age. Social services support people at risk of exclusion or abuse or experiencing challenges or personal crises and can take many different forms.

While public authorities have statutory duties to ensure the provision of public social services, they can be outsourced to and/or complemented by other providers. In recent years, the social services sector has faced a number of important challenges, including the continuing impact of austerity measures and administrative reform, digitalising local services and ensuring socially responsible procurement. Hence, the sector has undergone a profound transformation, including

the reorganisation of core service delivery among local public, private and not-for-profit sectors.[3] Even though the social services sector varies across EU Member States, not-for-profit service providers are increasingly important in all countries.[4]

Not-for-profit social service providers make up a major share of those social services, as well as of the social economy across Europe. This is in large part due to the historical role played by organisations and people who set-up not-for-profit structures to respond to social challenges that the state was unwilling or unable to do. Over time, as professionalisation took place, public authorities have continued to rely on the expertise, adaptability and strategic added value of these not-for-profit providers, while also providing a sense of continuity through their public regulation and funding. The more recent trend of privatisation or marketisation of social services towards for-profit social service providers has had a detrimental impact on the sustainability and continuity of care and support; in large part due to the impact on reduced costs, weakening wages and working conditions, lower social innovation and reduced expertise held by not-for-profit and public providers.

The delivery of high-quality social services is crucial for the effective implementation of at least eleven Social Pillar principles, including: *1. Education, training and life-long learning; 2. Gender equality; 3. Equal opportunities; 4. Active support to employment; 9. Work-life balance; 11. Childcare and support to children; 12. Social Protection; 17. Inclusion of people with disabilities; 18. Long-term care; 19. Housing and assistance for the homeless* and *20. Access to essential services.* Social services are also directly or indirectly impacting on the delivery of other principles, including *14. Minimum Income* and *15. Old age income.* Finally, as employers, social service providers also impact the principles from Chapter 2 (5 to 10).

Recommendations to EU institutions and Member States

1. Create an EU strategy for social services to support Member States in developing a resilient ecosystem for social services, which maximises their support to enable all people to lead dignified lives and reach their full potential.

Why?

Social services are an essential element of the European Social Model. They are an important component of social protection systems for all people across the life cycle and support people in differing situations, not only those facing poverty and social exclusion or with long term health needs. Social services enable people to reach their full potential, supporting people to access their rights, their well-being, participation in society as well as access to employment. The continuity and sustainability of the social services ecosystem is crucial, mostly because of the nature of the services themselves where people rely on care and support on a regular basis and often cannot live in dignity, be active, or fully access their rights otherwise.

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[3] Eurofound (2020): Representativeness of the European social partner organisations: Local and regional government sector and social services, Sectoral social dialogue series, Dublin
[4] Ibid.

The role played by these services makes continuous provision essential.[5] The continuity and further improvement of social service provision is essential for a stronger and more resilient Europe; able to empower people even during economic and social shocks by mitigating the fall-out and supporting the recovery. Social services also require an ecosystem that enables them to fulfil their role in facilitating the active participation of all in society, while also taking into account the varying needs people may have. An ecosystem relies on solid funding policies, sufficient and well-trained staff, and a strategy to achieve more effective support, in line with human rights.

In many EU Member States, social services are underfunded, and several social service providers struggle to guarantee continuity in provision, due also to cuts made during years of austerity. In this context, since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic the already struggling sector has had to increase its expenditure to ensure that care and support can be provided safely for all involved. The impact of the crisis on public budgets in the months and years to come could significantly damage the funding of social services; many of which have not yet recovered from the last economic crisis of 2008. The social services sector continues to be highly impacted; both directly by the public health situation itself as well as indirectly by the consequences of the pandemic on pre-existing challenges: including underfunding, staff shortages, unattractive wages and working conditions, and the need to adapt to evolving expectations of people who use the services. The economic and social impact of the crisis is also expected to lead to higher demand for social services.[6]

How?

- The European Commission should propose an EU strategy for social services that would support the creation of a better ecosystem for the sector, contributing to building a quality, affordable, available and accessible social infrastructure in all Member States.
- As part of the Action Plan on the Social Pillar, and to improve the recognition of the social services sector as essential for people to enjoy their social rights, the European Commission should include proposals that set out a legal, financial and coherent policy framework for social services.
- The European Commission should respond to the European Parliament's call for an EU framework for care services to create minimum standards and quality guidelines, as well as to help the sector recover from the crisis and fully benefit from the EU's Recovery Plan.
- The European Commission should set up a high-level task force for quality social infrastructure to build European minimum standards and recommend policy framework, support and advise the development of quality projects.

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[5] Ibid.

[6] Joint position Paper, Caritas Europa, Cedar, EASPD, ENSIE, Eurodiaconia, European Social Network, European Aging Network, EPR, EPSU, FEANTSA, Federation of European Social Employers, Social Services Europe, SOLIDAR, (2020): COVID-19 and Social Services: what role for the EU? Europe Expects Recognition, Urgency, Resilience

2. Facilitate the development and promotion of ambitious common quality standards on social services, rooted in a human rights-based approach, with a strong focus on social justice and equality in the crucial aspects of their accessibility, affordability, adequacy and coverage.

Why?

Quality social services are an investment in better social and societal outcomes and more cohesive, better performing and inclusive societies. To achieve this goal, they need to be accessible, available, of quality and affordable to all, and particularly to people in vulnerable situations. They also need to respond adequately to a person's individual needs by being people-centred and rights-based. Finally, adequate coverage needs to be ensured, including in rural and remote areas and segregated communities, and efforts must be made to combat all forms of institutionalised and public discrimination in access to quality social services. When it comes to residential services, in line with EU and Member State obligations in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, service users need to be guaranteed the right to choose where and with whom they live.

In 2010, the Social Protection Committee agreed on a *Voluntary European Quality Framework for Social Services.*[7] However, this has not been taken further in recent years and lacks any common approach to measure and compare the quality of social services across the EU.[8]

The availability, accessibility, affordability and quality of social services vary widely between Member States, with important disparities among regions and different groups of beneficiaries[9], including residents of rural areas or those living in remote and segregated communities, such as Roma settlements. Many beneficiaries in vulnerable situations see their access to services curtailed by a lack of information on their entitlements; low levels of basic literacy and numeracy skills; the absence of identity papers, a fixed address and/or bank account; and other hindrances. Poor transport links, as well as widespread practices of discrimination and antigypsyism often act as powerful deterrents for the most disadvantaged to access these much-needed services.

The UN Conventions on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which have been signed and ratified by the EU and its Member States, enshrine the right to live in community and family settings. This means that community-based care settings should be preferred. The transition from institutional to community-based care needs to be driven by a respect for human dignity, equality, and human rights. It involves promoting access to mainstream services for people with disabilities, such as housing, healthcare, education, employment, culture, and leisure, without losing out on the quality of support and care needed.[10] Social services, including specialised services, continue to play an important role

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[7] Social Protection Committee (2010): A Voluntary European Quality Framework for Social Services
[8] Eurodiaconia (2020): Implementing the Pillar of Social Rights: The way forward
[9] Eurofound (2020): Access to care services: Early childhood education and care, healthcare and long-term care
[10] COFACE, EASPD, EDF et al. (2016): Joint Declaration: Developing the support services of tomorrow

in facilitating this transition and in ensuring that all people have access to the quality and people-centred support and care they need.

With an emphasis on 'protecting people at risk' during the COVID-19 pandemic, we observe a return to more institutionalised forms of care, instead of continuing efforts to provide care services in the community. Consequently, beneficiaries have often been less involved in decision-making and have had a more limited choice of services. Furthermore, institutionalised forms of care as opposed to community-based care led to higher risk of infection, which was one of the main causes of the high number of fatalities in retirement and long-term care facilities.[11]

Moreover, governmental measures related to the pandemic have led to reduced availability, accessibility, and adequacy of many services, as they had to close temporarily or move fully online. Many services cannot be delivered adequately online, as they rely on face-to-face support. In addition, many people in vulnerable situations do not have access to online services.

How?

- EU institutions and Member States should ensure that non-discriminatory universal provision and access to adequate, affordable and quality social services are guaranteed to everyone living in Europe. This must include special attention to rural and remote regions, migrants, Roma and other ethnic minorities, as well as people in vulnerable situations and with multiple and complex social needs, requiring individualised approaches. Service providers need adequate support in making services available, including home and community care.
- Mainstream social services need to be complemented with specialised support schemes and measures, as well as outreach measures to inform on the provision and make sure no one is left behind.
- Member States need to provide adequate legal frameworks to support and develop integrated community-based services, including through social economy initiatives.
- The European Commission should continue to promote the *Voluntary European Quality Framework for Social Services* and develop tools to measure quality, based on comparable data.
- The European Commission should follow the call of the *European Parliament report on the employment and social policies of the euro area 2020*[12] to develop an EU framework for care services to set minimum standards and quality guidelines. These guidelines should encourage social services to follow a rights-based and people-centred approach, where the support provided is rooted in a meaningful, participatory, and individual needs assessment with the full ownership of the beneficiary.
- Measurement of the social impact of social services should also be qualitative, not only quantitative.[13] Keeping this in mind, reporting obligations for the reception of funds should be simplified to reduce any unnecessary burden for social service providers.

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[11] Social Platform (2020) Building Social Europe, A comprehensive implementation plan for an effective European Pillar of Social Rights
[12] European Parliament (2020): Report on the Employment and Social Policies of the Euro Area 2020
[13] For example, if an organisation is tasked with helping ten young people enter the workforce and succeeds with eight, the personal progress made by the two remaining individuals should be measured as well e.g. they may have learnt important social and professional skills during the process that will help them to find work in the future. (Social Platform (2014): Position paper on the financing of social services).

3. Create the right public funding and investment conditions for social services by using and adapting all available EU instruments that impact such conditions. Make relevant funds from the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and Next Generation EU accessible to not-for-profit social service providers and encourage Member States to use them extensively to fully implement the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Why?

Properly funded social services can provide high quality services that protect human dignity, enable their beneficiaries to actively participate in society and support the economic recovery. Social investment has a positive economic return in the long run, which should be taken more into account in budget planning and negotiations. However, across the EU, social services are structurally underfunded and subject to increased cuts, with both the funding rates and funding models often being inadequate.

The aftermath of the economic crisis of 2008 has shown that cuts on essential services have long-lasting negative effects on the entire society and can hamper the economic recovery. This mistake should not be repeated, and it is a positive step that EU fiscal rules currently allow for increased flexibility in this new time of crisis. While we welcome the opening up of EU state aid policies to support affected businesses during the crisis, not all national governments have applied the rule to not-for-profit organisations.[14] In addition, national governments need to plan ahead for the time when the general escape clause will no longer be in effect. This includes the allocation of sufficient public budget in the long-term for social services and the development of sustainable funding models.

Four main funding models have dominated across Europe in the last decade: public procurement, reserved markets, user-centred models (such as personal budgets) and private investment. If used appropriately, public procurement is an effective instrument to boost social economy enterprises providing services to people at risk of exclusion. To fund the transition to community-based care services, in line with human-rights principles, public authorities should follow more socially responsible public procurement, or consider other options such as personal budgets[15] and reserved markets.[16] Increased private investment in social services should also be considered, but needs structured partnerships between public authorities, investors and social service providers to ensure that quality requirements are respected.[17]

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to further reduced funding for many non-state service providers. Some services, funded for example through public procurement, could not provide their services fully in line with their pre-COVID-19 contracts and therefore did not receive their full funding. Others rely partly on donations, which have decreased because of the economic

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[14] EASPD (2019): Staff matters: from care worker to enabler of change
[15] Ibid.
[16] Reserved markets are a system where authorities can reserve access to specific public markets for organisations responding to certain characteristics (for instance, not-for-profit entities), without opening up to the full market. They fall under the EU public procurement directive.
[17] EASPD (2019): Alternatives to Public Procurement in Social Care

downturn and uncertainty, or they depend on the income of second-hand shops or other social economy activities, which had to close due to lockdown measures and financial closures. At the same time, many are facing increased spending to meet new and rising needs including protective equipment and additional staff. Moreover, demand for certain services has been increasing, pushing up costs further.

EU funds, such as the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), are a crucial source of funding for many social service providers and contribute significantly to the development of innovative ways of service provision. However, not-for-profit social service providers often struggle with the high administrative burden for applications and reporting procedures. This constitutes a significant barrier to EU funds, especially for smaller organisations.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, significant funding has been made available by Member States and the EU to support the economy and contain the current economic and social crisis. As outlined above, social services, especially not-for-profit providers, are encountering important organisational and financial difficulties during the crisis, putting the continuity, sustainability, and quality of services at further risk. The societal cost of discontinuing such services would be significant at a time when demand for social services is increasing. Therefore, a significant part of funding and financial support instruments needs to be used for investment in social services, to make sure that everyone can benefit from an inclusive and sustainable recovery. The Social Pillar, dubbed "the compass of Europe's recovery" by the European Commission, must be an instrument to help ensure that people are lifted out of poverty, social exclusion and discrimination. Maintaining dignity and respect for all people must be at the heart of the Action Plan for the implementation of the Social Pillar.[18]

How?

- Protect social services from any further cuts and fiscal consolidation measures and recognise this type of expenditure as key investment in healthy, prosperous, and resilient societies. Restore adequate funding to public social services and roll back cuts induced by the austerity measures of the past decade, which have weakened the resilience of the sector.
- The EU should do more to guarantee the continuity and sustainability of social services. This includes substantial social investment, adaptations to EU fiscal rules, state aid and public procurement policies, facilitating the use of EU funds to tackle many of the issues affecting social services during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The European Commission should encourage Member States to increase the allocation of public revenue to the provision of social services as a contribution to building resilience and well-being through reviewing public spending priorities, implementing tax justice and progressive taxation schemes, which support fairer redistribution.
- The EU should organise consultations with local and regional authorities prior to adopting country-specific recommendations of the European Semester.
- Through the European Semester, monitor whether Member States sufficiently fund social services, that National Resilience and Recovery Plans (NRRPs) prioritise adequate funding for social services, and that country-specific recommendations are implemented that deal explicitly with the provision of social services.

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[18] IFSW (2020): Position Paper on the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan

- The European Commission should formulate clear targets and benchmarks for social performance in the context of the Social Pillar's individual principles and the European Semester, to assess quality of services (and benefits).
- Involve service beneficiaries and providers as well as the civil society organisations who represent their interests, social partners, and local and regional authorities, in decisions concerning the new additional resources under the ERDF and ESF+, in compliance with the partnership principle.
- Explicitly include not-for-profit social service providers as a target group for the Next Generation EU Funds, as they are crucial for achieving a fair and inclusive economic recovery.
- Earmark 25% of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) for the fairness chapter, including investment in high-quality, affordable, universally accessible public social services, in line with the Social Pillar.
- The European Commission should provide stronger guidance on EU public procurement – including social procurement,[19] and EU state aid rules, in particular the General Block Exemption Regulation (GBER) rules – to national, regional, and local public authorities and ensure that social clauses are in place and effectively used. Guidance should include advice on adequately responding to the consequences of the crisis on some contracts.
- The European Commission should also clarify which ways of funding non-state social services, other than public procurement, are compatible with EU rules and promote those alternatives to help Member States build sustainable services.
- Reduce administrative burdens to facilitate access to funds for not-for-profit social service providers. This includes measures such as the use of simplified cost options and standardised call and/or application templates.
- The European Commission should encourage the piloting and development of personal budget schemes across the EU and facilitate the exchange of experiences and practices among authorities and service providers.
- Public authorities, financial institutions and foundations should promote the use of co-funding funds that are composed of both public and private funds. This could include the provision of public guarantee schemes so that interest rates are lower and financial institutions or investors are more willing to invest without expecting a high financial return.

4. Unlock the job creation potential of the social services care sector across Europe by improving the attractiveness of jobs, working conditions, wages, up- and re-skilling, health and safety, collective bargaining and better career paths. Improve the recognition of formal and informal care work.

Why?

Across the EU, nearly 9.2 million people are employed in the social services sector.[20] This corresponds to 6% of the total EU workforce, and varies from country to country.[21] In addition,

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[19] European Commission: Social Procurement
[20] Eurofound (2020): Representativeness of the European social partner organisations: Local and regional government sector and social services, Sectoral social dialogue series, Dublin
[21] Ibid.

there are at least 44 million informal carers in the EU, providing care for relatives or friends.[22] These numbers show the high need for social and care services in Europe. There is also an urgent need for better recognition of both formal and informal social and care work, including compensation specific to informal carers.

Additionally, in 2018, more than 450,000 positions were vacant in the social services sector,[23] showing the enormous employment potential of the sector. Better working conditions, social dialogue and a higher attractiveness of the social services sector would help address the existing staff shortages and improve the quality of services.

Social workers and other professionals in social care and support services are facing a number of challenges, including a lack of recognition of their profession and frequent underfunding of services. This results in low wages and unattractive working conditions, high work intensity, insufficient training opportunities, inadequate opportunities for professional development and an overly strong focus on management and bureaucracy. For service providers, this has led to significant staff shortages and difficulties to recruit and retain qualified staff.[24] For service beneficiaries, this means a risk of reduced quality and availability of the delivered services. Encouraging social dialogue and strong collective bargaining in the sector would help improve working conditions and make the sector more attractive for workers.

The development of the care sector towards community or home-based care requires a workforce with a variety of skills, which is able to provide support work in different settings including private homes, schools, but also businesses. This can increase the attractiveness of the sector but requires the right training.[25] Disproportionate reporting obligations are discouraging social and care workers who have chosen this profession for the human aspect, and should be simplified to reduce unnecessary burden.

Women are significantly overrepresented and some countries struggle with an ageing workforce in the social and care sectors. Therefore, improving wages and making the sectors more attractive, especially for young people, can contribute to closing the gender pay, employment and pension gaps. Supporting a diverse workforce – which includes ethnic minorities such as the Roma – in service provision also ensures that service delivery better incorporates and responds to the specific needs of different beneficiaries and communities. The roles of Roma health and education mediators, for instance, is crucial, as Roma communities face barriers and discrimination in accessing social services. The roles of health and education mediators should thus be recognised as a formal profession, subject to national employment law and rights.

Mobile EU workers and non-EU migrants are already an important element of the social and care sectors, but their potential could be even better utilised. Currently, many are struggling to enter the sector, because of skills mismatches, a lack of recognition of their skills and qualifications, or discriminatory attitudes. At the same time, the current situation is causing a brain drain in lower income countries, as qualified social and care staff emigrate to higher income countries where working conditions tend to be better.

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[22] Eurofound (2020): Shaping the future of long-term care: A good outcome will benefit all
[23] Social Services Europe (2019): Third country Social and care service professionals: Unlocking the job creation potential of social services
[24] EASPD (2019): Staff matters: from care worker to enabler of change
[25] Ibid.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated various issues related to the working conditions of social and care workers, already precarious prior to the pandemic.

Several Social Platform members, as well as many other stakeholders, report the lack of adequate health and safety equipment in social and care services. This has led to increased health risks, especially for older social and care workers as well as service beneficiaries. In addition, the pandemic has significantly increased demand on social and care staff, such as by asking care providers to stay in care facilities for significant periods of time. This increased pressure on staff led to increased absenteeism, sick leave, mental health challenges and staff departures, which reinforce existing shortages.

How?

- The EU institutions should create an EU strategy for social services aiming at supporting Member States to improve the conditions of the sector across Europe, including improving wages and working conditions.
- The EU institutions and Member States should promote and support the training and professional development of social and care workers through adequate legal frameworks and financial support.[26]
- Develop attractive career paths with life-long learning opportunities, as well as full employment rights, adequate wages and social security.
- The EU should launch a European campaign with the dual aim of increasing the societal recognition of careers in the social services sector and recruiting young people, by providing them with information on various career options. Information could be made available via the media, open day events on social services, and information sessions held by professionals in schools.
- Avoid overly burdensome reporting procedures, so that social and care workers can dedicate the majority of their work time to their main purpose, which is actual service provision. Support innovative methodologies such as new organisational procedures, co-production and the use of technology.[27]
- Create possibilities and incentives to recruit and retain a more diverse workforce, in terms of skills, qualifications, gender, ethnic background and country of origin.[28]
- Improve the recognition of skills acquired through experience, such as caring and soft skills of informal carers to facilitate their access to those jobs.
- Promote the implementation of the 2017 *Council recommendations on the European Qualifications Framework*[29] to facilitate recognition of qualifications obtained abroad.
- Member States need to ensure that social services, especially those with close contact with beneficiaries, have prioritised access to protective equipment, test and trace systems and vaccines for both social service beneficiaries and professionals. Social services need to receive additional support in emergency situations, including flexibility in

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[26] Areas of training should include the development of skills related to ICT and assistive technologies, person-centred case and care management, everyday life assistance, care techniques that support dignity, as well as anti-bias and anti-discrimination training. The development of soft skills is also increasingly important, especially in settings with user participation and co-production of services.

[27] EASPD (2019): Staff matters: from care worker to enabler of change

[28] Ibid.

[29] Council of the European Union (2017): Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning

funding lines to enable social service providers to allocate sufficient funding to health and safety measures.

- Promote the recognition of formal and informal social and care work and undertake additional efforts to highlight the employment opportunities in the social sector for people of all ages – and especially in schools and higher/further education institutions – by public employment agencies and in the media.[30] The Youth Guarantee should also be used to encourage young people to seek work in the social services sector.

5. Support digitalisation of social services, while making sure that negative side effects, including the digital divide and digital poverty, are tackled. Special attention needs to be given to accessibility, both digitally and face-to-face, and to the overall quality of services, as well as to ensuring that digitalisation helps improve the quality of jobs in the sector.

Why?

Technology and digitalisation can and will play an important role in the future of social and care support in Europe. Their success, however, will rely on social service providers having the ability to strengthen the personal dimension of care and support services, rather than any effort to replace it.[31] The use of technology should allow social and care workers to have more time for their work with beneficiaries, improve quality and availability, and should not be seen as an opportunity to reduce the number of staff.

The use of technology can support the development of new approaches, such as integrated care, which would utilise digital platforms to link health and care services. Such integrated care approaches would allow people to live at home or in a community setting, while being assured they would receive the support needed. However, as this implies the sharing of sensitive health data, sound legal frameworks are needed to enable and frame the development of such platforms to ensure data protection.

During the pandemic, many social services have had to adapt to the situation and have widened their use of digital tools. Many care homes have increased their use of tablets to allow residents to contact their family and friends. Other social services have continued providing at least part of their services online. However, online service provision has its limits, as most social services rely on direct human contact, and it is often difficult or even impossible to provide high quality social services online.

The digital divide is a reality laid bare by the COVID-19 crisis, demonstrating that many service beneficiaries are left behind because of a lack of access to infrastructure (internet coverage, electricity) equipment (tablets, PCs, smartphones etc.) and knowledge (digital skills). This is even more concerning as people in vulnerable situations requiring social services are often the most affected by a lack of digital access. Therefore, the right to and the provision of analogue access to information and services must remain guaranteed.

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[30] EASPD (2019): Staff matters: from care worker to enabler of change
[31] Ibid.

How?

- EU institutions and Member States should allow and support the use of funding for digital equipment and ICT-literacy training of staff and beneficiaries, ensuring access to life-long learning to support people in developing sufficient digital skills, to allow them to access services that have been (re-)organised digitally.
- Develop sound legal frameworks to support integrated care approaches at national and European level through the creation of interoperable platforms[32] supported across the EU. The frameworks should enable quality service provision, while guaranteeing the protection of sensitive personal data.
- Member States should ensure that adequate network coverage, of both internet and electricity, is available in rural and remote communities as well as segregated neighbourhoods, such as those where Roma live. Furthermore, support with utility bills might be needed to ensure that the most vulnerable can also reap the benefits of digital services.
- Develop tools to guide beneficiaries through the large variety of online services and help them identify serious and high-quality services. For example, this could be done through standardised labels for online services that meet certain quality criteria.
- Member States should ensure that services remain available through face-to-face intervention and targeted outreach measures for those for whom online access is either not an option or not preferred. Additionally, measures should be taken to address the digital divide.

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[32] These platforms would support independent living, link socially isolated people and allow better healthcare and care services.