

Commission action plan on labour and skills shortages lacks ambition



(26 March 2024) On March 21st, the European Commission unveiled its [action plan](#) aimed at confronting the pressing issue of labour and skills shortages across the European Union. The plan's release follows the [Val Duchesse Social Partners Summit](#) and is a response to the joint statement of the social partners, the Commission, and the Belgian Presidency on behalf of the Council, adopted on January 31st, 2024.

While the initiative acknowledges pertinent concerns such as digitalisation in the workforce and psychosocial risks, it falls short of demonstrating the requisite ambition needed to tackle these challenges effectively. The plan recognises the lack of quality employment as a factor driving job shortages, but proposed solutions remain vague, unenforceable, or - in the worst-case scenario - suggest a potential commodification of labour. The plan does not address improving collective bargaining nor does it make the link between economic governance rules and their impact on the financing that is necessary to increase staffing and improve pay and conditions.

One positive is that the action plan refers to the role of the sector and the sectoral social dialogue as a forum to address labour shortages and skills. Many public administrations and public services face staff shortages, particularly in the health and care sector. We will call on employers to work on the issues raised in the plan to find common solutions.

EPSU, together with HOSPEEM for the health and hospital sector and Social Employers for the social services sector, has submitted [joint contributions](#).

Based on our recent Framework of Action on Recruitment and Retention, HOSPEEM and EPSU expect the following issues to be addressed:

- supporting the retention of experienced workers,
- promoting work-life balance,
- regulating the employment of agency workers
- encouraging diversity and gender balance,
- promoting Continuous Professional Development,
- addressing psychosocial risks,
- and preventing third-party violence.

Given that health and social care sector faces the highest labour shortages in the EU and EU research shows that stress at work was the highest for health, residential care and transport workers, the action plan give little concrete initiatives targeting health and social care workers. For example, the action plan cites the invitation for social partners to engage in negotiations to update the multi-sectoral guidelines to tackle third-party violence and harassment related to work in the healthcare sector. These are [multisectoral negotiations](#) and include such sectors as local government, national government and education. These negotiations are an initiative of the employers and unions - and by including elements such as this in the action plan, it is as though the Commission is asking us to engage in our own work rather than presenting innovative solutions.

The plan's emphasis on conducting surveys on mental health within the health workforce is insufficient by EPSU and its partners - tangible measures are needed, not more data collection. Despite mentioning the European Care Strategy, there is a conspicuous absence of a corresponding action plan at the EU level specifically targeting healthcare workers.

Furthermore, the plan incorporates initiatives that EPSU and its partners are already engaged in, such as working on recommendations to improve working conditions in social services. The plan's mention of a peer review on psychosocial risks is a step in the right direction, but its impact remains uncertain without concrete follow-up actions.

It is positive that it recognises the staff shortages in health and care, but this is not new information. The plan lacks effective and specific measures to address them. Surveys on mental health do not improve working conditions nor contribute to recruitment and retention of staff.

The joint response from EPSU and HOSPEEM specifically referred to our Updated Framework of Action on Recruitment and Retention; the Joint Declaration on Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and Life-Long Learning (LLL) for All Health Workers in the EU; the Code of Conduct and follow up on Ethical Cross-Border Recruitment and Retention in the Hospital Sector; and guidelines and examples of best practices to address the challenges of an ageing workforce in the healthcare sector. None of this is reflected in the action plan.

EPSU expects greater ambition and from the High-level Conference on the Future EU Health Union organised by the [Belgian Presidency](#) on 26 and 27 March.

Read our position on how the EU can tackle the staffing crisis in health and care [here](#)

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