

COVID-19 and Social Services: what role for the EU?

Europe Expects Recognition, Urgency, Resilience

Joint Position Paper | 25th June 2020

1. We Expect More Recognition for Social Services

Social Services provide essential care and support to millions of people in Europe, helping older persons, persons with disabilities, children and young people at risk, people at risk of poverty, homeless persons, migrants, people suffering from domestic violence, and many others to live better, healthier, longer and more active lives. Most importantly, they help people to **enjoy their human rights**.

Social Services provide essential help to family or other carers, contributing to their **employment and work-life balance opportunities**. They are extremely important to tackling **gender inequalities** given the disproportionate share of women in providing family care.

Social Services are also **essential to Europe's social market economy**. They help to create meaningful employment for **11 million workers, 5% of the total EU workforce, and with an increase of 24%** in the last ten years.¹ The contribution of millions of volunteers across Europe can also not be ignored, especially from the perspective of **social cohesion**.

Social services are services of general interest, primarily provided by public or private not-for-profit organisations – often referred to as Social Economy actors -, who **create local jobs**, including for people usually **excluded from the labour market** and are **active across the European Union**, in the largest cities, as well as in rural communities. The [EU Social Investment Package](#) highlights social services as an investment, rather than as a cost.² This remains even more valid today.

Social services are essential services.

¹ Social Employers, [Social Services Workforce in Europe: State of Play and Challenges](#), (2019)

² European Commission, [Social Investment Package](#), (2013)

Yet, they are insufficiently recognised as essential. **Too often, social services are only left as an afterthought.** Nothing demonstrates this as well as the tragic situation in long-term care facilities for older people during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, recently [expressed](#) a **debt of gratitude towards care workers**. The European Union is on a mission to [leave no one behind](#).³ It is now time to go beyond words and to put that in action; starting with ambitious and targeted measures in support of social services. The European Union's upcoming initiatives, including the **EU Recovery Plan**, is the opportunity to further boost the process of a **more Social Union** by strengthening the contribution made by social services **to Europe, its people and its economy**.

We recommend the European Institutions to strengthen the essential nature of social services; including through a targeted Communication on the Contribution of Social Services to the mission and values of the European Union in the [Recovery Plan for Europe](#), as well as in the outputs resulting from the [Communication on a Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions](#).⁴

2. We Demand Urgent Action for Social Services

Although the COVID-19 situation appears to be improving – at least in the short term - the social services sector continues to be **highly impacted**; both **directly** by the public health situation itself and its slow and sometimes only partial reactivation, as well as indirectly by [the consequences of the pandemic on pre-existing challenges](#), such as: underfunding, staff shortages, unattractive wages and working conditions, and the need to adapt to evolving expectations by people who use the services.⁵ The economic and social impact of the crisis is also expected to lead to higher demand for social services, than prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare and exacerbated many of these challenges. Social service providers, workers and the people using

³ European Commission, [Communication on a Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions](#), (2020)

⁴ European Commission, [Recovery plan for Europe](#), (2020) and European Commission, [Communication on a Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions](#), (2020)

⁵ European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, [Surveillance of COVID-19 at long-term care facilities in the EU/EEA](#), (2020)

these services have also been **largely voiceless during the pandemic**; for instance, the **older persons** living in and the **professionals working in nursing homes, persons with disabilities** and their **support workers, homeless** without access to suitable housing and many others.

One point is clear, the European Union and Member States have collectively been too slow to react to the **social consequences of the crisis**. Based on [data collected in 22 EU Member States](#), thousands of social service providers from across Europe continue to have increased expenditure, unmet by existing funding measures.⁶ Across the Union, three additional costs for the services stand out: **buying protective equipment, covering additional staff costs, and infrastructure expenses** including digital technologies. Despite increased costs, many services providers also face **reduced income**; either due to less public support, lower charitable donations or the closure of income sources such as social enterprises during the confinement.

What are the consequences?

- **Too many people are left without the support they have a right to;**
- **Too many professionals and volunteers are unable to provide support in valued and safe conditions;**
- **Too many social service providers are facing financial and organisational risks.**
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More **URGENCY** is also needed for the European Union - with [its existing measures proving effective in many ways, but not yet bringing much relief in the realm of social services](#).⁷ This includes the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative, where there is **little evidence** of it being used to support the aforementioned funding needs in social services.

We urge for the creation of a short-term European Emergency Fund for Social Services during the COVID-19 pandemic, which would allow the European Union to directly support the provision of and access to social services during this period of emergency. A Permanent Helpdesk should also be created to use CRII (and other EU funds) for more medium-term COVID-19 emergency needs.

⁶ [European Union Wide Overview : COVID-19 Funding Needs in Social Services & Access to EU Funds \(including CRII\)](#), (2020)

⁷ [Open Letter in Follow-up to High Level Discussion on COVID-19 and Social Services](#) (2020)

3. We Need More Resilience in Social Services

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 aiding the **recovery**.⁸

Yet, social services also require an ecosystem that enables them to fulfil **their role in facilitating the active participation of all in society**, whilst 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 this regard, **continuity and sustainability of the 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**.

There is, of course, **not just one single social services ecosystem** in Europe. However, **all require further strengthening and improvement**, given the **staff shortages** that exist across the European Union, the **funding gap** in most if not all countries, and the **waiting lists or inadequate services** that still exist even in the most effective systems. However, **the capacity for public authorities to react** and invest in a resilient social services ecosystem **differs** from country to country. Without EU action, this will lead to **increased social divergences** across Europe and **weaken the social market** economy. The risk is even higher since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic will limit the capacity of highly affected or generally less rich Member States to invest in their welfare systems.

Given this, the **European Union needs to play a stronger role** in the development of social services ecosystems; for instance, in funding, policy guidance, monitoring of progress, support to social dialogue and legislation where appropriate. Such EU action is crucial if it is to strengthen **social convergence, cohesion and resilience** across Europe and to ensure the **European Pillar of Social Rights** becomes a reality irrespective of where one lives. The recently announced [Recovery Plan for Europe and its €1.8 trillion budget](#) is the right starting point.⁹ Whilst the **proposal provides possible opportunities**,

⁸ Social Services Europe, [Towards the Implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights the Role of Social Services](#), (2018)

⁹ European Commission, [EU long-term budget 2021-2027: Commission Proposal](#), (2020)

it does not yet provide **sufficient guarantees** in support of the European Union's ambitious social agenda.

We urge the European institutions to maximise the potential of the Recovery Plan for Europe to strengthen resilience and recovery through guaranteed budget allocations to quality and affordable social service provision in the existing proposals. For instance, a min. 5% of the Recovery and Resilience Facility should be allocated to reforms in social service provision, including both Long-Term and Short-Term/Crisis Care. REACT-EU's European Social Fund dimension should earmark 25% to social inclusion measures, as is recommended for the main European Social Fund+ proposed and it should in no way replace ESF+ funding, since both funds have different scopes.

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