

Towards a People's Europe

Response to European Commission Consultation
Action Plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights





About the European Social Network

The European Social Network (ESN) is the independent network for local public social services in Europe. It brings together the organisations that plan, deliver, finance, manage, research, and regulate 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 expertise.

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About this briefing

ESN represents the perspective of its member organisations, public social services, in EU initiatives. With this briefing, ESN submits its response to the consultation launched by the European Commission on the Action Plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) representing the view of its members. This response is the result of many initiatives undertaken by ESN over the past 28 years in areas of social inclusion ranging from child protection through inclusive activation to support for adults with disability and older people.

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Introduction



The European Social Network (ESN) is the independent network for local public social services in Europe. It brings together 140 organisations from 35 countries that plan, finance, research, manage, regulate, deliver and monitor local public social services, including health, social welfare, employment, education and housing.

ESN has engaged in different processes to improve the protection of social rights of vulnerable population groups in Europe for more than 28 years. This has included projects and thematic publications on [children's social services](#), [disability](#), [older people's care](#), the [social services workforce](#), [integrated public social services](#) and [quality in social care and social services](#). These publications as well as our recent work on [Covid-19](#) constitute the basis for the proposals contained in this briefing.

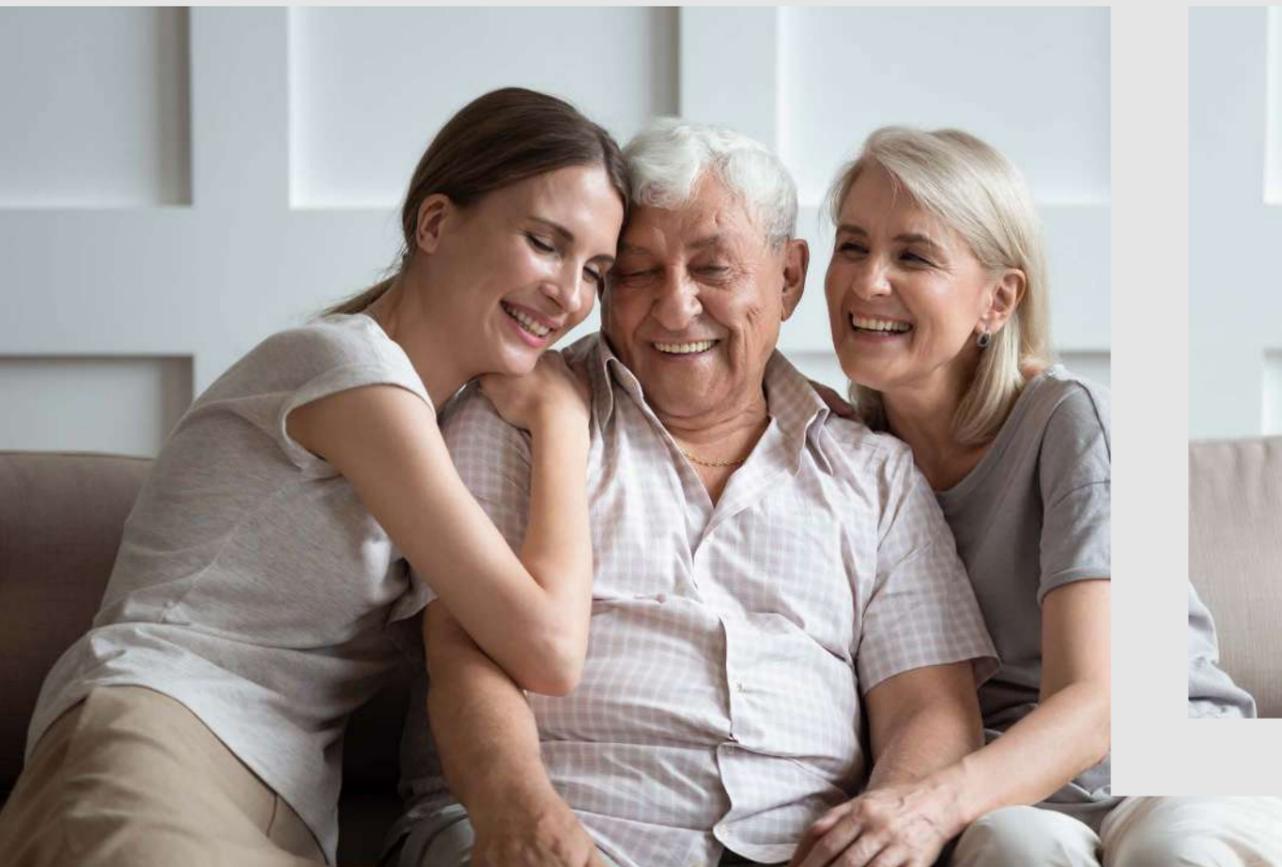
ESN welcomes the commitment and progress of the European Commission towards the preparation of an Action Plan for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. The proposal to have an action plan accompanying the Pillar principles was suggested by ESN in its response to the [consultation on the European Pillar of Social Rights](#) back in 2016. Therefore, ESN would like to emphasise that our messages back in 2016 are now more relevant than ever.

Public social services authorities are instrumental in the planning, development, financing, delivery and monitoring of social services. Therefore, public social services authorities are fundamental partners in the implementation of the principles included in the Pillar.

The objective of our response is to present ESN's perspective on the Action Plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights. The briefing starts by describing the recent trends leading to the transformation of social welfare systems. Next, the paper makes suggestions for the implementation of the Pillar at European and national levels. Finally, the briefing presents several cross-cutting recommendations for the Action Plan as a whole, and specific recommendations for individual Pillar principles focused on social protection and inclusion.



1. Recent Trends



1.1 A changing European context

Covid-19 has significantly exacerbated pre-existing inequalities in society, leaving no segment of the population untouched. The consequences of the pandemic are pervasive, impacting on public services and people, with some groups hit harder than others. In particular, the pandemic has placed additional pressure on a social services sector which has been reaping a bitter harvest of failure to adequately invest in social care and social services in the follow-up to the 2008 financial crisis. The pandemic has exposed existing gaps and weaknesses of social care, protection, and welfare systems, creating more vulnerability amongst general populations, leading to financial precarity and, unless addressed, further social exclusion.

An understanding of the ways that social services have responded to the Covid-19 crisis has the potential to inform planning for future phases of the pandemic as well as future similar crises at national and local levels. Therefore, at ESN we have been gathering [examples](#) of the ways in which public social services have been ensuring continuity of care in response to the Covid-19 crisis. There have been three main types of measures implemented across countries to [ensure the continuity of care services](#), including specific legislation and policies to support provision, the development of local partnerships for service delivery, and reinforcing service delivery for the most vulnerable.

As we move forward, there are two important facts that should be recognised by decision-makers at the various levels:

First, we must learn from this crisis to ensure that public social services are better supported so that they can be well prepared for future crises of this nature.

Second, public social services will play a vital role in the economic recovery, through supporting the employment, health, and social inclusion of the most vulnerable in local communities across Europe, leading the shift to a newly inclusive model of community-based care, and developing an increasingly growing care economy.



1.2 Investing in social services, Investing in Europe

The Action Plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights is a crucial tool in guiding the realisation of social rights for people of all ages, ensuring the **accessibility, coverage and quality** of public services, particularly for the most vulnerable. The Action Plan should cover all 20 principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights in an integrated and holistic manner. The implementation of this Action Plan should be realised through European and national actions in the areas of **legislation, policy and socio-economic coordination, and funding**.

Back in 2016, ESN highlighted in our [response](#) to the proposal for a European Pillar of Social Rights that the Pillar could become a useful instrument to:

- establish **long-term strategic objectives** (along the lines of the 2020 targets);
- promote **greater consistency between policy measures** launched by the European Commission;
- and lead to setting **minimum social standards** across European countries.

However, ESN also emphasised in 2016 that if the Pillar is to have credibility, it is important that it is accompanied by a document outlining how it will be implemented (for instance, through some form of roadmap or action plan) and how the action will be monitored (for instance, which indicators will be used to measure each of the principles included in the proposal).

Finally, we also suggested in 2016 that the proposed Pillar structure would benefit from greater clarity as to how it would intend to address the issues highlighted under the proposed principles, given the fact that they are often dealt with by different government departments at different levels in Member States, hence the need for coordination with national, regional and local authorities.

Four years later, the Commission is intending to launch an action plan for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. The proposals that ESN made back in 2016 are today more relevant than ever.

1.2.1 Legislation

In its Action Plan, the Commission should clarify to what extent the provisions contained in the Pillar relate to a **legislative or a benchmarking agenda**. If the Commission wants to establish a legislative agenda, it should clarify the relation between the Pillar and the legal acquis in the areas where the Commission has competences.



1.2.2 Policy and socio-economic coordination

If the exercise remains at the level of **benchmarking**, it would be necessary that the Commission together with representatives from national governments (for instance, from the Social Protection Committee and from the Employment Committee) agree specific benchmarks, or guidelines to establish those benchmarks at national level. It would also be advisable that the Commission clarifies as to whether the **mechanism for monitoring** the action of the Pillar remains some form of 'soft policy' coordination instrument similar to the [Open Method of Coordination](#) (OMC).

It would also be constructive if the proposal addressed how the issues highlighted under each principle should be addressed and by whom, given the fact that they are often dealt with by different government departments at different levels in the Member States.

The action plan could certainly be useful to establish long-term strategic objectives, promote greater consistency between policy measures launched by the European Commission, and lead to setting consensual social standards across European welfare states.

1.2.3 Funding

The Commission may look at the possibility of discussing adherence to the Pillar principles for the **allocation of EU Structural Funds**, which in turn could be used to support implementation of the Pillar's principles.

An ambitious Action Plan, which recognises public authorities' **duty of care** towards the individual throughout the life-course and places public social services at its centre, can assist in overcoming the fallout of the current pandemic to achieve a more socially inclusive Europe that places the social rights of people of all ages at its core.

Key statutory duties of local public social services include working with vulnerable families, families who need housing, children who need to be protected from harm, protecting and safeguarding vulnerable adults, and providing care and support for frail elderly people. A key challenge is to ensure that the Action Plan of the Pillar resonates with the statutory duties at local level so that local communities feel that the Pillar is relevant for them.

To meet Europe's social ambitions and ensure social rights for people of all ages, ESN recommends a two-tiered approach to the successful implementation of the Action Plan at European and national levels.

2. Suggestions for the successful implementation of the EPSR



2.1 At European level: Create the structures for successful implementation and monitoring of the Action Plan

2.1.1 A Social Strategy Post-2020

The EU 2020 Strategy included a commitment target to fight poverty and social exclusion. Emphasis on this commitment seems to have faded over time. A comprehensive and integrated social strategy post-2020 is paramount to supporting the EU to meet its social and economic objectives. This strategy should build on the [2020 Strategy](#); the various policy initiatives launched by the European Commission on [active inclusion](#), [investing in children](#), social investment, [long-term unemployment](#); the [EPSR](#) and its future Action Plan, as well as international frameworks like the [SDGs](#). The implementation of any proposed strategy needs to be driven by specific objectives, measurable with target indicators, and monitor implementation through the European Semester cycle.

2.1.2 Monitoring through the European Semester Cycle

Effectively measuring the implementation of the Action Plan is imperative to monitoring progress. Therefore, the European Semester could be used as a means for ensuring progress in the implementation of the principles contained in the EPSR in European countries. This could be done in at least two ways.

First, by issuing Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) linked to programmes implementing the Pillar principles. Second, this exercise should be complemented by a European monitoring mechanism on the fulfilment of the recommendations and therefore implementation of the Pillar principles. This mechanism may take the form of a platform with representatives from stakeholders, including public social services.

2.1.3 EPSR Social Scoreboard

This monitoring mechanism may draw on existing scoreboards, such as the scoreboard of key employment and social indicators introduced in 2014 in the framework of the European Semester, which monitors progress towards the objectives of the EU 2020 Strategy.

To ensure the holistic and integrated implementation of the EPSR at national level, it will be important to broaden the scope of the indicators beyond those which are purely economic or employment focused. The scoreboard could be further developed to include indicators inclusive of all principles related to the social inclusion of vulnerable groups.

This may take the form of disaggregating indicators by age, gender and disability. On the one hand, this exercise could be relevant to assess the impact of social transfers (e.g. principles 14 or 15). On the other, it may involve for instance collecting data of children, adults and older people in care (relevant for the implementation of principles 11, 17 or 18).



2.1.4 Link funding to the implementation of the Pillar

This may take two forms. The Commission may wish to develop capacity building activities with national stakeholders to raise awareness about the Pillar and its principles, identify and promote good practice, for which specific funding should be allocated.

A way of securing implementation of the Pillar is by linking European funding to the fulfilment of its principles. Along these lines, the Commission may look at the possibility of discussing with national management authorities adherence to the Pillar principles for the allocation of EU Structural Funds. Likewise, direct EU funding calls could be developed with an aim to support the implementation of individual Pillar principles or a combination of them.

2.2 At National level: Strengthen social services to support the most vulnerable

2.2.1 Recognise the essential role of public social services

Ensure the inclusion in the Action Plan of the essential role of public social services in the implementation of the principles contained in the EPSR, particularly Chapter III. The ability of public social services to respond to the principles of Chapter III and implement them will be central to its success. Recognition will also contribute to ensuring adequate investment.

2.2.2 Invest in public social services to realise the objectives of the Action Plan

Public social services play a key role in the implementation of European initiatives at local level, such as those supporting the implementation of the principles contained in the EPSR. To make this a reality, the Action Plan should include clear references to social services and public authorities' statutory duty of care.

2.2.3 Support national authorities to set up a Care Guarantee for All

Support for vulnerable people comes mainly from cash transfers while there is little investment in the provision of individualised and integrated personal social services. A cross-cutting element across the 20 principles of the EPSR is the provision of support to different vulnerable populations.

Promoting a guarantee to care for those who need it is the first step to ensure quality in social services and social care and personalised support for those in need. A Care Guarantee for those in need would bring together initiatives like the [Recommendation on Investing in Children](#) and the [proposal for a Child Guarantee](#), the [Youth Guarantee](#), [initiatives on long-term care](#) and the [European Disability Strategy](#).

3. Recommendations on the implementation of specific Pillar principles



3.1 Support for children (Relevant principle: 11)

The Action Plan of the Pillar should recognise that 'the child's best interests must be a primary consideration' when public authorities assess the need to provide children with care and protection. Therefore, the Action Plan should include actions targeted towards the promotion of integrated community-based programmes underpinning the three pillars of the 2013 Investing in Children Recommendation.

Special attention and targeted actions will be needed for specific groups of children, such as children from a low socio-economic background, children with disabilities or refugee and migrant children, including unaccompanied children. In a context in which the number of children in residential care [has been increasing in the past years](#), the Pillar should recognise that all children in need of care (regardless of their status) should grow up in a family environment in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has been ratified by all EU countries.

3.2 Integrated social and employment services (Relevant principles: 12, 13, 14)

The Pillar's Action Plan should include targeted actions towards efficient and integrated social support combining social protection benefits and social services. These actions should include programmes that link the provision of minimum income to a social inclusion plan that guarantees access to social services.

The Action Plan should pay specific attention to support mechanisms for public social services authorities working with the long-term unemployed and populations with difficulties in accessing the labour market, such as youth leaving care, people with mental health problems and people with disabilities, as well as migrants and ethnic minorities.

The Action Plan should focus action on partnership approaches between employment and social services working in an integrated fashion to support people with most difficulties in accessing the labour market. Implementation could target the creation of specific professional figures, professional capacity building, joint assessment and monitoring tools, and joint case management.



3.3 Invest in the care workforce (Relevant principles: 15, 16, 17, 18)

Programmes providing entry level training, supporting recruitment and retention, career progression would help address the shortage in the care workforce, which is an issue across Europe. If these are aimed at those living in areas of disadvantage and younger people, it could also support the work of the EU in combating poverty and investment in local communities promoting the care economy.

The Pillar's Action Plan should work with national governments on a social care and social services workforce strategy that includes career progression and appropriate remuneration and includes specific actions targeted towards women and people who have been working in informal care.

3.4 Inclusion of people with disabilities (Relevant principle: 17)

The Pillar's Action Plan should include actions targeted at the social inclusion of people with disabilities in addition to employment. The Action Plan should focus on the promotion of joint programmes of income, social services and support; advancing the active participation of people with disabilities in their care and support plans; promoting choice and control through personal budgets, and programmes recognising people receiving care as people with skills and ability.

3.5 Investment in long-term care services (Relevant principle: 18)

The Covid-19 crisis has exposed the weaknesses of the residential model of care for older adults with long-term support needs. The Action Plan should target programmes promoting accessibility, affordability, coverage, and quality of long-term care shifting towards a [community and home-based model of care](#). It should include work with national governments to incentivise the creation of a definition of 'quality long-term care' in legislation and policy, especially in those countries lacking long-term care quality [standards](#).

Implementation should focus on investments promoting cooperation between community health and social services in the integrated delivery of community care for older adults with complex needs. These efforts should include experimenting and documenting different funding models, fundamental for accessible high-quality long-term care. Lastly, the Action Plan should include targeted actions towards the adaptation of long-term services for vulnerable individuals, such as people with disabilities growing older.

3.6 Support for homeless people or at risk of homelessness (Relevant principle: 19)

In those countries where data is collected, local authorities have been reporting an [increase in homelessness year on year](#). Therefore, the European Commission should address in its EPSR Action Plan the collection of data on homeless people and people at risk of homelessness, as well as the creation of comprehensive policy and care frameworks to address housing and homelessness.

More specifically, the Commission should encourage national governments to include a permanent section reporting on homelessness in their public housing plans. The Action Plan should also promote joint programmes combining housing, care and support for people in need of housing, such as young people, students, single-parent households, asylum seekers and people from ethnic minorities.

Bringing it All Together

EPSR Action Plan

Tool for

- Long-Term Strategic Objectives
- Greater Policy Consistency
- Minimum Social Standards

Actions

- European actions
- National actions
- Who is responsible for what
- Implementation monitoring

Implementation

European level

- European Semester
- Recommendations to specific countries
- Monitoring mechanism with European stakeholders
- Social Scoreboard broken down by age, gender, disability
- Linking EU funding to Pillar principles

National level

- Recognise essential role of public social services and their duty of care
- Invest in public social services to realise EPSR objectives
- Promote and support national authorities to set up a Care Guarantee for All

Specific Principles

Children's support

- Initiatives supporting children's best interest
- Programmes to ensure children grow up in family environment
- Integrated approaches along the 2013 Investing in Children Recommendation

Integrated social and employment services

- Linking minimum income to social inclusion plans
- Support social services working with people farthest from the labour market
- Promote social and employment services partnerships for people farthest from the labour market

Social care and social services workforce strategy

- Recruitment, retention, progression
- Focused on the disadvantaged and youth
- Help to grow the care economy

Promote social inclusion of people with disabilities

- Joint income, social services and support programmes
- Promote active participation
- Support choice and control
- Develop personal budgets

Invest in Long-Term Care model shift

- Community and home-based model of care
- Cooperation between health and social care
- Promote new funding models
- Targeted actions for people with disabilities growing older

Support for homeless people or those at risk of homelessness

- Comprehensive policy and care models
- Definition and data collection
- Housing plans promoting combined housing, care and support models



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