

Austria: The long-awaited reform of long-term care is now on its way, but turns out to be less encompassing than expected

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A reform of long-term care (LTC) was adopted by parliament on 14 July 2022. It comprises measures regarding three main areas, namely training of LTC staff, working conditions in LTC, and the financial situation of caring relatives. At the same time it falls short of addressing a number of major structural challenges facing the Austrian LTC-system.

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Description

The government programme of the current Federal Coalition Government, which took office in January 2020, includes plans for a broad reform of long-term care (LTC), intended to address nationwide planning and coordination, and also a reform of the financing structures. Concrete plans were expected to be announced in spring 2021, but it took until June 2022 for the reform to be presented to parliament.

The measures of this reform, adopted by parliament on 14 July 2022, concentrate on a number of specific issues, but do not change the overall structure of the Austrian LTC-system.

First, the aim is to make training for a care/nursing profession more attractive to potential recruits. People undergoing initial education in a care profession at a care and nursing school, university of applied sciences or in other courses will receive financial support of at least €600 per month during their entire education. Apprentices at vocational schools will receive €600 per month for up to six months of a care/nursing assistant internship. Persons who decide to retrain for a care/nursing profession and are entitled to subsidies from the Public Employment Service (PES) will receive a scholarship of at least €1,400 per month from 1 September 2023. For young people, there will be a Care Apprenticeship (*Pflegelehre*), initially as a pilot project. This apprenticeship will last for three or four years and will qualify apprentices for work as care assistants (level I or level II; *PflegeassistentIn* or *PflegefachassistentIn*). Furthermore, access to jobs in the care sector will be made easier for qualified staff

from non-EU countries, and persons with a foreign qualification certificate will have the possibility of starting working as a care assistant even before the process of professional recognition has been completed.

A second bundle of measures aims at improving working conditions in LTC. For 2022 and 2023 the Federal Republic will make available €570 million for a “wage bonus” (*Gehaltsbonus*), amounting to about one additional month’s wage per year, to be paid to qualified staff in nursing jobs. This is a temporary measure, but the plan should propose a long-term solution by the end of 2023. Qualified care staff will also be granted an additional week of paid vacation from the age of 43. Furthermore, competencies of care/nursing assistants will be broadened. In future, they will for example be allowed to connect up intravenous drips and to administer injections in specific cases.

Third, some measures directly address people in need of LTC and their caring relatives. The amount of the LTC allowance for people with severe mental disabilities and dementia (i.e. cash benefits granted to people in need of LTC) will be somewhat increased. It is expected that approximately 8,500 persons will benefit from this higher allowance. Entitlement to care leave for caring family members (*Pflegekarenz*) and to the related cash benefit is to be expanded from one month to three months if firm-level or branch collective agreements include a related provision. Relatives with the social insurance status of “self-insured” (*Selbstversicherung*) or using “continuing insurance” (*Weiterversicherung*) after having stopped gainful employment due to care responsibilities for a person with substantial need for LTC (i.e. receiving an

LTC allowance of “level 4” or higher [on a 7-point scale]), will, as from 2023, receive a “bonus for relatives” (*Angehörigenbonus*), amounting to €1,500 per year. The plan is to grant this benefit to the person who performs most of the informal care (i.e. just one person per person to be looked after). According to estimations, more than 30,000 persons will be eligible for this transfer.



Outlook and commentary

Evidently, the LTC reform primarily aims to reduce the labour shortage in the care/nursing professions and to improve staff working conditions. According to forecasts, around 34,200 new carers and nurses (full-time equivalents) will have to be recruited by 2030, but it remains unclear if the measures mentioned above are sufficient to address this challenge. Regarding working conditions, it remains to be seen whether, and to what extent, the “wage bonus” will be followed by a general increase in wages in the LTC-sector, which appears essential if the sector is to be made more attractive.

At the same time the reform does not touch upon a number of other structural problems and challenges facing the Austrian LTC system. The reasons for these problems and challenges include split competencies (between the Federal Republic and the federal provinces [Bundesländer]) and a lack of coordination (see European Commission 2021, 302ff. for an assessment). This, inter alia and with variations across federal provinces, causes a partial lack of availability and affordability of formal care at home by publicly organised LTC-services, alongside strong incentives for providing LTC either through private informal care or through permanent residential services. The LTC reform does not propose the setting of nationwide LTC quality standards or a plan to implement these standards; it also does not address thoroughly the mid- and long-term financial sustainability of the LTC system. Overall, in contrast to what was announced in the government programme (Republik Österreich 2020, 174), no structural decisions have been taken on these points. It will be important that these gaps be filled in the near future.

Further reading

European Commission (2021), Austria, in: [Long-term care report Trends, challenges and opportunities in an ageing society](#), Volume II, Country profiles, Brussels, 302-317.

Republik Österreich Parlament (2022), [Sozialausschuss ebnet Weg für wesentliche Teile der angekündigten Pflegereform](#) [Social Committee paves the way for essential parts of the announced care reform], Parlamentskorrespondenz No. 801 vom 30.06.2022

Republik Österreich (2020), [Aus Verantwortung für Österreich. Regierungsprogramm 2020–2024](#) [Out of responsibility for Austria. Government Programme 2020–2024]

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