



## **Joint Position Paper**

Preparing the social services sector for the COVID-19  
resurgence and increasing its resilience



With financial support from the European Union

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic puts enormous pressure on the social services sector, exacerbating already pre-existing financing and staffing difficulties. The pandemic has severely complicated the provision of essential services to millions of EU citizens in need of care and support, as well as the health and wellbeing of service users and workers.

It has hence presented major challenges for social services users, workers and the entire sector. There is evidence from several countries that a proportionally high number of infections and deaths appear in long-term facilities for elderly people: more than 40% of COVID-19 related deaths and 80% in some high-income countries<sup>1</sup>. Support services facilities for persons with disabilities, children and other people in need of care were and still are also largely affected by the crisis.

The social services sector, which represents 11 million staff in Europe<sup>2</sup>, has to face many challenges linked to occupational safety and health. The social services workforce is particularly vulnerable during a health emergency for many reasons: pre-existing understaffing and shortage of supplies, exposure to the virus, workers on the frontline providing services in close contact with persons, in many cases with no possibility of social distancing.

In some countries, the pandemic has shown a lack of organisational measures, safety protocols and protective equipment in the sector that are needed to respond effectively to such a health emergency. It has put in the spotlight the importance of preparedness at national and European level to ensure the sector is fully equipped and organised to respond timely and adequately. In addition, Covid-19 has highlighted the need for more EU funding, action and social dialogue to protect both workers and service users, and their human rights, as well as to guarantee the continuity of services during such crises.

In order to move towards a Strong Social Europe and achieve many of the goals set out in the new Commission's workplan, it is time the essential role social services play in our communities is recognised. This also includes recognition through appropriate funding and financing opportunities.<sup>3</sup>

## Challenges faced by the social services sector

Early on, COVID-19 has confronted the sector with important challenges. These challenges are occurring and will keep reoccurring in the future, if not addressed, such as:

- Lack of clear measures and protocols coordinated at national and European level, regarding health and safety at work;
- Lack of testing in residential settings;
- Lack of protective equipment for workers and service users;
- Lack of funding to invest in safety and managing the crisis;
- Understaffing and shortage of supplies;

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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organisation report (2020): *Preventing and managing COVID-19 across long-term care services*. URL: [https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-2019-nCoV-Policy\\_Brief-Long-term\\_Care-2020.1](https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-2019-nCoV-Policy_Brief-Long-term_Care-2020.1)

<sup>2</sup> According to Eurostat for NACE codes 87 and 88 for 2019.

<sup>3</sup> European Commission (2020): *A Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions*. URL: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/fs\\_20\\_49](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/fs_20_49)



- High proportion of people with COVID-19 staying in residential care, not being admitted to hospital;
- Lack of training on how to handle an infectious disease;
- Lack of mental health support for service users and workers during and after the crisis.

## Recommendations for the preparedness of the sector to secure protection and safety for service users and workers

The additional pressure that the COVID-19 pandemic put on care and support services should draw a lesson for the future handling and recognition of the sector. It is key to consider social services as a priority and to work on the preparedness for a new emergency, in order to secure the continuous care provision to older persons, persons with disabilities, children and other people in need of support and care.

### That is why the sectoral social partners in social services jointly recommend to:

- Provide reliable and updated information on the guidelines and protocols to follow.
- Update the occupational health and safety risk assessment to be able to foresee collective and individual measures to mitigate the risks.
- Develop crisis management protocol to guarantee the continuity of services and the protection of workers and service users. It should collect clear guidelines on technical and organisational measures, and personal protective measures to prevent and protect service users and staff in the case of an outbreak.
- Guarantee the access of staff to training in safety measures at the workplace in all languages that are widespread in the workforce.
- Ensure access and availability of tests in social care facilities: tests must be fully available in social services facilities for service users and workers, to identify possible infections in time and interrupt the spread.
- Strongly encourage residents and staff to be vaccinated against seasonal influenza to avoid a simultaneous circulation of two viruses during the winter.
- Ensure the access and availability of personal protective equipment (PPE): full access and availability of adequate protection material such as masks, hydro-alcoholic solution, protective spectacles and gloves for care workers, taking into consideration the fact social distancing is most of the time impossible for front line carers. Joint procurement initiatives such as RescEU are an integral part of this effort and need to have procurement rounds also for long-term care workers.
- Provide psychological support unit for service users and staff: COVID-19 can have a psychological impact on workers and service users, such as elevated rates of stress or anxiety<sup>4</sup> caused by the increased pressure, which may reduce the availability of staff.
- Classify COVID-19, when a reliable link can be established between the working situation and the infection, as an occupational disease across Europe, to provide a safety net for infected workers;

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<sup>4</sup> WHO article: *Mental health and COVID-19*. URL: <https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19/technical-guidance/mental-health-and-covid-19>



- Use of digital tools<sup>5</sup>: the use of a variety of digital devices can improve occupational health and safety and the management of workload. Digitalising processes, documentation systems and remote connections provide transparency and time efficiency to care workers and decrease their exposure to the virus. Thanks to the involvement of all stakeholders (workers, employers, users, etc.), digitalising processes also have the potential to reinforce the social impact of social services provision to service users. Digital tools such as videocalls also enable service users to keep in contact with their relatives and feel less isolated. Attention must be paid to national and regional discrepancies in access to and affordability of such tools. Telework can also be developed but with a special attention to its specific risks<sup>6</sup>.

## The role of the European Institutions & Member States

The European Institutions and Member States play a special role in crisis anticipation and preparedness. All EU citizens should be well informed on their preventive role in the context of a pandemic. High-risk behaviour can put extra pressure on social services, which can be averted with clear, well-targeted information and guidelines. For the sake of efficiency and endorsement of implementing the following recommendations, it is also necessary to consult the social partners at both the European and national level.

- Coordination of common safety protocols and health guidelines at European level: clear health guidelines and protocols at European level that include more coordinated measures and actions in the social services sector across Member States. Protocols need to include testing and protective models in social services facilities, and preparations for a worst-case scenario, in which hospitals reach their maximum capacity.
- Develop guidelines on enhanced cooperation between health and social care and on cross-border movements for care workers through national borders that could be closed as a response to the crisis. Before this background, we welcome President von der Leyen's announcement to strengthen the funding and the mandate of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) as an important step towards this goal.
- Creation of social funds for emergency response: specific funds for health emergencies at national and European level for the sector to cover infrastructure expenses, guarantee remuneration and income support, support flexible work arrangements, training, and psychological interventions. Moreover, the funds should also ensure the continuity of care options for social services staff, such as childcare facilities to limit staff shortage.
- Urgently facilitate social services' access to EU and national funds to ensure the full availability of personal protective equipment and tests for the sector, and funding of innovative responses to the crisis, such as digital tools and distant support. We regret that the Recovery and Resilience Facility at present does not guarantee investment in social services.
- Ensuring sufficient and well-trained social care staff: the capacity across Europe to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak was challenged by serious staff shortages. The social services sector was already facing difficulties recruiting, training, and retaining its workforce. Primarily, more funding is needed to tackle the staff shortages. In addition, strategies at national and

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<sup>5</sup> Read EPSU/Social Employers Joint Position Paper on Digitalisation in the Social Services Sector: <http://socialemmployers.eu/en/news/joint-position-paper/>

<sup>6</sup> Read EU OSHA practical tips to make home-based telework as healthy, safe and effective as possible: [https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Practical\\_tips\\_to\\_make\\_home-based\\_telework\\_as\\_healthy,\\_safe\\_and\\_effective\\_as\\_possible](https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/Practical_tips_to_make_home-based_telework_as_healthy,_safe_and_effective_as_possible)



European level must be developed to ensure sufficient and well-trained workers in emergency situations, including, if necessary, skilling and certification processes.

- Recognition for the social services sector: develop and strengthen the awareness and recognition across Europe of the essential nature of social services and the need to invest in such services, which provide essential support to millions of people and contribute to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). Social services workers are key to tackle health emergencies and therefore have to be prioritised in relevant measures to protect staff and service users.

## The role of Collective Bargaining and Social Dialogue

Social partners play a **key role in ensuring occupational health and safety**, by jointly agreeing possible solutions, measures and initiatives to protect workers and service users, and to promote the recognition of the sector. In many countries across Europe, social partners reacted promptly by introducing measures regarding emergency work organisation, remuneration and the safety of workers that saved thousands of lives and allowed the facilities to run in the middle of a pandemic. A constructive dialogue between the social partners, from company to EU level, is now more important than ever to ensure adjustments and measures that are necessary to allow social services workers to protect the health and wellbeing of the people they care for - and their own.

In addition, EU social dialogue can be fundamental to promote cooperation among social partners in ensuring preparedness of social services. Ensuring the safety of staff and service users as well as the quality of services offered is not only an obligation but also one of the priorities for social dialogue in this sector. This can be implemented through exchange of good practices and the formulation of principles and guidelines to ensure preparedness and increase resilience of the sector for a pandemic resurgence, to be implemented and developed further at national level.

