

JOINT POSITION PAPER

# Recruitment and Retention in European Social Services

State of play, ways forward and  
the role of European social dialogue

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*This paper is the product of the discussion and input gathered during the 3rd Thematic Seminar of the PESSIS + project “Recruitment and Retention in Social Services: Improving the sector’s attractiveness” as well as the main demands developed jointly by EPSU and the European Social Employers in the past years and summarised in the scoping documents presented during the seminar.*

*The aim of this paper is to identify what can be done to improve the attractiveness of the social services sector based on the discussion between EPSU and the Social Employers in the framework of the PESSIS+ and DialogueS projects. The document also summarises some demands and aspects to be followed up in the framework of the European sectoral social dialogue.*

***This paper has been drafted before the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, it may in the future be supplemented or amended by a new EPSU-Social Employers joint document taking into account the outcome of forthcoming discussions on COVID-19 and social services, especially concerning occupational safety and health.***



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# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction: How to respond to a growing demand for quality social services in Europe</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Recruitment and retention in Social Services - state of play</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Recruitment and retention in Social Services - which ways forward?</b>	<b>5</b>
	3.1 Decent work, health and safety at work, organisational development, working life and work-life balance	5
	3.2 Improving the image of the sector	6
	3.3 Occupational Safety & Health	7
	3.4 Training and lifelong learning	7
	3.5 Migrant workforce and “care drain”	7
	3.6 Digitalisation	8
	3.7 Care in underserved and rural areas and in big cities	9
	3.8 Emerging issues: non-standard forms of work, new models of care, migration	9
<b>4</b>	<b>The role of the European Institutions</b>	<b>10</b>
	4.1 European Pillar of Social Rights	10
	4.2 European Semester	11
	4.3 New Skills Agenda for Europe	11
	4.4 European Social Fund	11
<b>5</b>	<b>The role of Collective Bargaining and Social Dialogue</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Topics to address in a joint workplan</b>	<b>13</b>

# 1

## Introduction: How to respond to a growing demand for quality social services in Europe

Similar demographic trends have been reported all over Europe: life expectancy is growing and with populations increasingly ageing, rates of disability and illness increase. Many people develop long-term conditions which may affect their mobility and ability to live independently.

Moreover, female participation in the labour force is increasing as well as mobility of workers, creating an increasing number of families whose members live in different cities or countries and where informal and unpaid support to family members can no longer be provided.

Furthermore, the labour markets' changes increase precarious working conditions for many employees producing a higher demand for social services.

Consequently, patterns of care are changing, too. High-quality formal social services provision is needed to respond to the needs of changing societies.<sup>1</sup> Reliable services also strengthen the potential for the local economy.

Quality social services are a fundamental right for the citizens in the EU (art 34 EU Charter of fundamental rights). In order to give answers for the growing challenges for social services it is necessary that the EU and the EU Member States commit to good and guaranteed services and decent work. This means sufficient financing and staffing, real social partnership and free trade union activity in order to improve working conditions and salaries by way of collective agreements, and well qualified staff as well as free access for social services for all EU citizens.

1 Social Services Europe report: Recruitment & Retention in Social Services – Unlocking the Sector's Job Creation Potential, 2017. URL: <https://www.socialserviceseurope.eu/reports>

# 2

## Recruitment and retention in Social Services – state of play

The social services sector is one of Europe's biggest job creators. **It directly employs almost 11 million staff<sup>2</sup> in Europe, representing 4,7 % of the total EU workforce.** Together with health services, social services represent 7% of the total economic output in the EU.

Due to changing demographics, labour mobility, increasing family diversity and evolution of mind-sets, the social services sector is one of the fastest growing economic sectors. Over the past 10 years, it has created more than 2 million jobs<sup>3</sup> - and is expected to further grow significantly over the next few decades.

Despite the growing demand for accessible, affordable and quality social services, many employers experience major difficulties in recruiting, training and retaining an appropriately trained and skilled workforce. In a similar way, employees have difficulties entering the sector in a stable way, with opportunities for career developments, personal growth and fair working conditions.

For this paper, the following definitions of recruitment and retention are used:

- Recruitment: The demonstrated capacity to attract the professionals with the required skills and qualifications to occupy defined positions.
- Retention: The capacity to maintain staff in the sector, limiting unjustified (“voluntary”) losses to other sectors.<sup>4</sup>

### Better working conditions and healthy workplaces to improve the image of the sector

For many, working in the social services sector is not a preferred career choice. This has various reasons. The sector is often associated to flexible working hours, lower pay compared to national average wages, and both emotionally and physically demanding working conditions. Many social service employees only stay in the sector for a few years or are forced to shorten their working hours. Moreover, difficult working conditions lead to persistently high rates of absence due to sickness. This further exacerbates existing staff shortages. Improving working conditions is essential to improving recruitment and retention.

2 According to Eurostat survey on NACE codes 87 and 88 for 2018, 10 918 600 employees work in organisations classified in these two NACE codes.

3 According to Eurostat, from 2009 to 2018.

4 [https://ec.europa.eu/health/sites/health/files/workforce/docs/2015\\_healthworkforce\\_recruitment\\_retention\\_frep\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/health/sites/health/files/workforce/docs/2015_healthworkforce_recruitment_retention_frep_en.pdf)

## Gender imbalance

Working in care has often been considered a “woman’s job” because of the stereotypical consideration of men and women’s roles in society. Looking at official EU figures, it is possible to notice this has been reflected in the gender composition of these sectors: **education, health and social services fields are among the most gender segregated sectors.** According to the Social Employers’ Observatory report on Social services’ workforce in Europe, 82 % of the workforce is female. The most gender segregated occupation in the EU today is personal care work, with women making up 90% of employees in that field.<sup>5</sup>

By contrast, the management level in social services mainly consists of men. This is due to cultural stereotypical attitudes against men taking up a caring role, since caring in most societies was traditionally left to women. Efforts must be made to move away from stereotypes and rebalance the workforce and management levels. This can be done also by challenging the status quo and actively promote the recruitment of men and the promotion of women. Equal opportunities in career paths development between men and women, as well as equal pay for equal work and work of equal value, are important measures to ensure that the sector is sufficiently staffed with well-trained professionals.

## Financial constraints

Another critical element of change in the last years has been **austerity**: social services often lack resources to address the growing demand in society. Austerity policies have led to a reduction in funding from governments and local authorities, which limit pay levels and pay rise and do not enhance the image of the sector among potential new workers. In other cases, the funding levels have not decreased, but inflation and changing needs lead to scarcity of financial means.

Therefore, organisations delivering social services are also experiencing significant difficulties in retaining their workforce, because such constraints often lead to short term and part-time contracts, a strong turn-over, poor working and career conditions as well as low salaries.

## Ageing workforce

Additionally, the **workforce in the social services sector is ageing** too. With the share of workers above 50 years increasing from 28,63 % in 2009 to 36,12 % in 2018<sup>6</sup> (compared to 32,51% for all activities), organisations face specific challenges in responding to older workers’ needs, but also in building up a new, younger workforce to replace the one retiring.

5 EIGE report: Study and work in the EU: set apart by gender, 2018. URL: <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/study-and-work-eu-set-apart-gender-report>

6 According to Eurostat survey on employees working in organisations classified in NACE codes 87 and 88.

# 3

## Recruitment and retention in Social Services – which ways forward?

Social services have generated significant employment growth in the past decade. The need for social services provision is expected to rise in the years to come while at the same time, the sector is confronted with recruitment difficulties, high turnover and drop-out rates. Without interventions, the capacity to ensure the right to care services, and to adequate social protection for long-term care needs in an ageing society will be at stake, resulting also in increased inequalities.

Social services workers perceive purpose and appreciation as positive aspects of their work, however several organisational matters such as working times, high workload or lack of support by the staff are often hampering job satisfaction and increasing the intention to quit.

A considerable number of social services workers change jobs every year, with some of them moving into other sectors. In the Netherlands, 180,000 of the 1.2 million employees in care change jobs every year. Almost half (80,000 employees) opt for a job outside the social care sector.<sup>7</sup>

**In the current demographic context, ensuring sufficient and well-trained social care staff is of high priority for the wellbeing of the EU's population. Recruitment and retention in social services are issues that require immediate and urgent responses, including through social dialogue at national and European level.**

So, what can be done?

### 3.1 Decent work, health and safety at work, organisational development, working life and work-life balance

A holistic approach to social care must first and foremost consider the quality of the work and the wellbeing of employees and social care beneficiaries. The health and safety provisions by European legislation have to be implemented and enforced at the workplace. Management, front-line workers and workers representatives have to be involved in the process of defining what types of jobs are needed, and the expertise and experience required to do the job. Moreover, in order to address the global shortage of care workers, an evidence-based skill mix of well-trained staff and staff-to-beneficiary ratios should be discussed by social partners at the relevant level.

As mentioned above, the sector is female dominated and wages are generally low. An essential measure that would improve recruitment of qualified and motivated staff is the improvement of wages at national level and of working conditions. Social partners, via a strong national and local collective bargaining and other social dialogue initiatives, should make this a priority.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.duobus.nl/nieuws/n:71:t:zorgsector-haalt-alles-uit-de-kast-om-werknemers-te-behouden>

There is strong evidence for the direct connection between leadership and workers' health and well-being at the workplace. A committed and pro-active management can increase job commitment and productivity and reduce psychosocial risks and stress.<sup>8</sup> The appropriate training of managers plays an important role in this, where the manager acknowledges his or her responsibilities in guaranteeing quality working conditions for workers and the well-being of users.

In an attempt to bind workforce to the organisation, some employers work towards establishing a positive workplace culture, to develop a shared understanding of the work done, of common values, structures, activities and the sense of responsibility of workers. Fostering a positive organisational climate is an important retention factor. Employees working in an environment they perceive as positive, where their contribution is valued and recognized, are less likely to be exposed to occupational risks, such as accidents, occupational diseases and emotional exhaustion and among all, are more motivated. Throughout the working life, professional and personal support aligned with the employees' life stages can be an important retention tool.

One of the deliverables of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) is the **Work-life Balance Initiative, which addresses the work-life balance challenges faced by working parents and carers**. The work-life balance directive<sup>9</sup> has been adopted in 2019 and will allow parents and care givers to benefit from similar measures all over Europe, to better combine their work and family life. In the framework of collective bargaining, social partners should cooperate to develop working time models that incentivise working in the sector and prevent exhaustion or burnout, especially by working on the improvement of the time schedules and sovereignty over time which are always difficult to prepare and implement when the need of care never stops.

By providing services to parents and relatives of children, older persons and persons with disabilities, social services also contribute to the improvement of work-life balance, an important fact that must be taken into consideration.

### 3.2 Improving the image of the sector

The recruitment and retention of social services workers require a comprehensive approach, that takes into consideration working conditions, communication strategies, human resources management, continuous career paths and foresighted planning.

Both employers and professionals in the sector should communicate broadly on the social services professions and their diversity. To do so, several European countries have already launched information and promotional campaigns that make social services more visible to the general public. Targeting all talent available is an important approach to recruiting a workforce diverse in abilities, gender, age, culture, ethnic background and sexual orientation and identity.

Attracting young people to start a career in care is crucial to establishing a sustainable social services workforce. As many young people have a lack of knowledge of social services, several organisations have set up schemes to introduce social professions to a potential workforce, such as volunteering and apprenticeship programmes.<sup>10</sup>

The Youth Guarantee scheme, launched as an EU initiative to provide young people under 25 with access to employment, continued education, apprenticeships, or traineeships can contribute to raising awareness among young people about developing a career in the social services sector.

8 EPSU –HOSPEEM report (2016): *Assessing health and safety risks in the hospital sector and the role of the social partners in addressing them: the case of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) and psychosocial risks and stress at work (PSRS@W)*. URL: <https://www.epsu.org/sites/default/files/article/files/Report%20Helsinki-Version-20.05.16-EN-Final.pdf>

9 Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on work life balance for parents and carers

10 Social Services Europe report (2017): *Recruitment & Retention in Social Services – Unlocking the Sector's Job Creation Potential*. URL: <https://www.socialserviceseurope.eu/reports>



Promoting the public image of social services work can help boost a trend among workforce (also among those who are looking for a career change) to work in sectors that combine their professional ambitions with their values and goals.

### 3.3 Occupational Safety & Health

Among the most frequently reported occupational risks in the social services sector are musculoskeletal disorders (MSD) & psychosocial risks and stress at work. Investing in preventing and managing these occupational risks contributes to improved health of workers and higher retention rates.<sup>11</sup>

Defining the right framework is fundamental to ensure a level playing field in social services and reduce musculoskeletal disorders & psychosocial risks: the development of a consistent EU framework on MSD and the effective implementation of the existing legislation on psychosocial risks should be considered a priority at EU and national level. Moreover, while defining the health and safety framework, legislators and social partners must ensure to include gender health and gender specific needs, instead of applying a “neutral masculine” approach. Whilst there are some safeguards for women experiencing pregnancy related illnesses, other gender specific health issues like menstrual problems or menopause should be taken into account.

Physical and mental stress at work have an impact on workers, managers, the organisations and the service users, and therefore the social services sector as a whole. It leads to undermine well-being and job satisfaction, a lack of motivation and efficiency, increased accident and injury rates.

Worker participation and a high level of management commitment can play a key role in preventing and reducing psychosocial risks and stress at work. Workplaces with active cooperation between workers representation and management are more likely to report that their organisation’s occupational

safety and health and psychosocial risk management are effective.<sup>12</sup>

Only through close cooperation of the Social Partners – Trade Unions, Employers Organisations and, where applicable, Governments – such issues can be prevented and managed in an effective way that leads to a win-win situation.

### 3.4 Training and lifelong learning

It is important that staff get sufficient professional qualifications and develop their skills to enable them to have an evolving career in the sector. Guaranteeing time and means for vocational education and training is an important mechanism for career progression. The possibility to acquire additional diplomas, certifications and skills through vocational training, especially when there is lack of initial education, strongly contributes to securing a career path in the sector. In some cases, more flexibility in qualification standards (e.g. for partly qualified care workers) may be an option for serious consideration.

Training of the existing workforce is seen as essential for developing, enriching and valuing the professional experience of the workers. Re-skilling opportunities for a life-long career in the sector are another important means that can help to avoid career re-orientation, early retirement or emigration.

In career development, employers need to make sure that women and men have equal rights and opportunities and take the necessary measures to facilitate equal career progression.

### 3.5 Migrant workforce and “care drain”

The free movement of EU workers facilitates intra-EU labour mobility. Foreign-born workers, may they be from another EU member state or from outside the EU, already play a big role in the care workforce. Many Member States increasingly rely

11 Ebd.

12 Ebd.

on mobility and migration to address shortages in the sector. However, recruiting from third countries and especially outside the EU has several implications, e.g. concerning qualifications requirements, fair contracting, ethical concerns etc.

Two major issues are the lack of recognition of diploma and qualifications obtained in the countries of origin and the difficulties in accessing professional training.

In addition, qualified workers leaving their country to work abroad can cause labour shortages in those countries, who then have to turn to other countries in order to fill their demand. Moreover, most of these workers are women and often, especially at the beginning, move alone, without their family members, to settle in another country to provide care work. This had led to a “care drain” in countries of origin, both of professional carers and of informal carers who provided care and support to children and older people.<sup>13</sup> This gap can be filled with other carers from rural and poorer areas or other countries, creating a phenomenon called “global care chains”. It is therefore necessary to monitor these processes in both receiving countries and in sending countries and to develop positive models of care migration.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, in some sending countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the economic situation is steadily improving, and salaries are rising. This motivates the return of some migrant workers to their home countries and causes again pressure for the sector throughout Europe due to shortage of staff.

The mobility of employees between Member States should be encouraged, but in a smart, fair and ethical way. This includes:

- allowing people to work and live where they want;
- improving salaries and improving working conditions in the social services sector in “sender countries”;
- managing and regulating agency work in a way that is fair to the workers, service providers and users;<sup>15</sup>
- counteracting undeclared work.

In some European countries, communication in several languages is a day-to-day matter; supported people can have difficulties to communicate with care givers who don’t speak their mother tongue and communication between colleagues can also be challenging. Employers and authorities should facilitate access to language courses in order to ensure professional and personal inclusion.

### 3.6 Digitalisation

New technologies are changing the way in which social services are coordinated and delivered. The Social Employers and EPSU have stated their position on challenges and opportunities of Digitalisation in social services in a joint position paper.<sup>16</sup>

In the paper, digital technologies are described as helpful tools in the recruitment of staff: offering a workplace with modern, up-to-date equipment

13 According to the WHO (2006) there are 57 countries with critical shortages equivalent to a global deficit of 2.4 million doctors, nurses and midwives. The UK Department of Health and Social Care has produced [a list of countries that should not be actively recruited from](#).

14 See for instance the [German “triple-win” project](#).

15 See ILO Convention 189 which contains the right to a clear (preferably written) communication of employment conditions which should in case of international recruitment be communicated prior to immigration.

16 Available here <http://socialemmployers.eu/en/news/joint-position-paper/>.

can increase the employer's attractiveness, also for young professionals. With the help of online portals, employers can self-promote and get in touch with a specific target group. Technologies such as screening software can facilitate the recruitment process. Digital technologies can also become a retention tool, for example if they are used to contribute to a better workload management and the reduction of the physical strain of care work.

At the same time, new ways of work (e.g. online platforms) raise questions for quality standards and the organisation and regulation of work (contractual questions, working time, coverage by social security schemes, etc). In this framework, social dialogue and collective bargaining at different levels are fundamental tools to regulate the introduction and use of new technologies.

Dealing with new technologies requires additional training and qualifications. When and where needed, learning digital skills should be integrated into relevant education structures and professional training. In the job, vocational training is needed to ensure that employees manage to keep pace with ongoing developments.

### **3.7 Care in underserved and rural areas and in big cities**

Rural areas often face major recruitment difficulties as resources and workforce tend to be concentrated primarily in urban areas. More elaborate strategies are required, to make sure workforce is equipped with the right skill set to work in rural areas and that residents of those areas can profit from the same quality services as city dwellers. The lack of sufficient workforce in rural areas also calls for investment in digitalisation and new models of care.

Most large cities in Europe face challenges of costs for housing and more generally costs of living which leads social workers who can't afford it to commute on long distances. This has a negative impact on their quality of life and can lead to resignation.

### **3.8 Emerging issues: non-standard forms of work, new models of care, migration**

The number of workers in precarious employment has grown significantly over the past two decades also in this sector. Precarious work includes involuntary part-time, temporary agency work, fixed-term work, bogus self-employment and independent work. The spreading of such atypical work arrangements in the social services sector has several implications for the relationship between employer and employee and impacts work organisation and work patterns.<sup>17</sup> It also puts at stake workers' coverage by social security schemes and impacts the financing of those schemes and creates in-work poverty. Social dialogue initiatives can help to promote the positive aspects and opportunities of non-standard work arrangements, while preventing possible negative effects of those new forms of work in the social services sector. They are another important tool to address these issues.

New models of care provision, such as community-based care, are another development that merits attention in the social services sector. The social professions should evolve in the direction set by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), in the sense of an inclusive approach to services, more focused on the person, not only in institutions but within the society, which requires service adaptation and new skills as supporting independent living.

Mobility within EU countries as well as migration from outside the EU is directly reflected in care. Persons with a migrant background come to the fore as clients, as well as employees in social services. The cultural diversity of staff and patients requires intercultural competence of employers and workers. This includes culturally sensitive care and support systems, that allow persons in need of care to live according to their individual cultural and religious values despite external conditions (e.g. living in a care home, having a carer with a different cultural background, etc.).

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/observatories/eurwork/industrial-relations-dictionary/atypical-work>

# 4 The role of the European Institutions

EU level employment policies aim to create more and better jobs throughout the EU. The Europe 2020 strategy is the EU's agenda for growth and jobs for the current decade. The Europe 2020 strategy is used as a reference framework for activities at EU -, national and regional levels.

Several European frameworks have an impact on national level policies and therefore possibly on the way social services are designed and delivered.

## 4.1 European Pillar of Social Rights

The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) was proclaimed by the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission in November 2017 and aims at delivering new and more effective rights for citizens. It builds upon 20 key principles.

At least 6 of the principles can only be realised through effective and quality social service systems, such as principle 11 on "Childcare and support to children", principle 17 on "Inclusion of people with disabilities" and principle 18 on "Long-term care".

The explicit mentioning of right to affordable and good quality long-term care (LTC) in the EPSR and the related inclusion of LTC in the European Semester have opened a new opportunity for addressing LTC more proactively at the EU Level.

In addition to the articles touching directly upon social services, article 8 of the EPSR highlights the importance of social dialogue and the involvement of workers, pointing out that the social partners shall be consulted on the design and implementation of economic, employment and social policies according to national practices. Further on, the article states that social partners "shall be encouraged to negotiate and conclude collective agreements in matters relevant to them, while respecting their autonomy and the right to collective action. Where appropriate, agreements concluded between the social partners shall be implemented at the level of the Union and its Member States." Support for increased capacity of social partners to promote social dialogue shall be encouraged.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en)

## 4.2 European Semester

The European Semester is a process of exchange between the European Commission and the member states which is supposed to involve social partners at EU and national level in a consultative role. Since the adoption of the EPSR, the Semester deals with social issues with the help of indicators measuring progresses and allowing comparisons. This process can be potentially useful for social convergence. However, to this end, democratic participation and the involvement of social partners need to be further developed on a European and national level.

## 4.3 New Skills Agenda for Europe

The New Skills Agenda for Europe was adopted by the Commission in June 2016. It launched 10 actions to make the right training, skills and support available to people in the EU. Those actions are designed to improve the quality and relevance of training and other ways of acquiring skills, make skills more

visible and comparable and improve information and understanding of trends in demands for skills and jobs (skills intelligence) to enable people make better career choices and find quality jobs.<sup>19</sup> This strategy could support the development of needed skills in the social services sector, such as digital skills. It could also help to tackle challenges such as the “care drain”.

## 4.4 European Social Fund

The European Social Fund (ESF), now ESF +, is the European Union’s main financial instrument for supporting employment in the member states of the European Union as well as promoting economic and social cohesion. As social services provision is constantly evolving, for example towards community-based care and services, funding schemes such as the ESF can support the development of new services, training staff and experiencing new solutions. Social partners have a role to play in this field thanks to their consultative role towards the EU institutions.

19 DG Employment: New Skills Agenda for Europe, <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1223>.

# 5

## The role of Collective Bargaining and Social Dialogue

A constructive dialogue between the social partners at all levels is crucial to steer developments in recruitment and retention in social services into a sustainable direction. Maintaining and expanding information, consultation and participation rights of social partners in social services can help to ensure high quality jobs and service provision in the sector.

Collective bargaining in the sector at national level is a crucial element to retention and recruitment strategies, that contributes to increased service quality as well as job satisfaction. The right of social partners on and the outcome of free collective bargaining regarding working conditions and pay must be safeguarded by national and local authorities responsible for financing or contributing to the labour costs of social services. The areas of national, regional and/or sectoral collective bargaining critical for recruitment and retention include:

- National or local earnings/pay;
- Working time (duration, scheduling, discretion over working time and short time flexibility);
- Prospects - job security, career progression and contract quality;

- Job quality - skills, good social & physical working environment, work intensity;
- Introduction of new technologies;
- Staff ratio and workforce qualification.

In addition, the European Union has significant competence when it comes to employment and labour policies, including through **European Social Dialogue**. European Social Dialogue can help to ensure the active involvement of management (and employers' organisations) and workers (and their representatives, including trade unions), by jointly assessing the challenges related to recruiting and retaining an adequately skilled workforce for the social services sector. Sharing good practices on EU level and establishing an EU repository for those practices can facilitate recruitment and retention and increase the success of measurements.

Furthermore, EU funding for related projects can help social partners engage in research and development on recruitment and retention, help measure effectiveness and develop innovative working practices.

# 6

## Topics to address in a joint workplan

The Federation of European Social Employers and the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU) are interested in working together on the following issues - in the framework of European sectoral social dialogue:

- Develop a Joint framework on how to support the social services sector in responding to the challenges & opportunities in the field of recruitment and retention with a gender and diversity perspective; detailing much further some of the challenges and possible solutions posted above and recommendations for policy makers.
- Develop Guidelines for the sector on how to best respond to challenges & opportunities linked to recruitment and retention. The focus would be on specific examples and practices, relevant for different challenges, to highlight possible solutions. This document would be aimed at the sector itself, focusing on the practical implementation and successful take-up of job creation and retention measures in the social services sector.
- Launch a joint campaign on recruitment and retention, to raise awareness of the challenges at hand and highlight promising practices from across Europe.

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