

JOINT POSITION PAPER

# A European Care Strategy must address Workforce Needs and Challenges

8 December 2021



# Executive Summary

In her 2021 State of the Union Address, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced a new European Care Strategy addressing both carers and care receivers, from childcare to long-term care.

To achieve affordable, accessible and high-quality care services, a European Care Strategy must address and anticipate workforce needs and challenges. In fact, social services are already experiencing some major difficulties in terms of funding, staffing levels, recruitment and retention, gender balance, and an ageing workforce. In addition, some countries are currently dealing with a declining number of students aiming to become carers. Demographic changes will only exacerbate the workforce shortages. To deliver on its goals, a strong European Care Strategy should address these issues by taking into consideration:

- An integrated approach to care - health care and social care, informal and formal care, residential and home & community-based care.
- Funding for social services as an investment in the future, not as a mere cost.
- Quality working conditions, appropriate salaries, training and career paths and healthy / safe workplaces, in order to recruit and retain employees and to stimulate career interests for social services.
- Measures to ensure adequate, safe staffing levels.
- The need to improve the public's image of care work and its value to society.
- Investment in and use of technological and social innovations.
- The importance of developing social dialogue and supporting collective bargaining.

# 1

## Context

In her 2021 State of the Union Address, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced a new European Care Strategy. The Commission's Annual Work Programme for 2022 further declared that the Strategy will address both carers<sup>1</sup> and care receivers, from childcare to long-term care:

*"The strategy will set a framework for policy reforms to guide the development of sustainable long-term care that ensures better and more affordable access to quality services for all. It will also address childhood education and care with particular attention being paid to children with disabilities and those from disadvantaged groups."*<sup>2</sup>

The European Pillar of Social Rights and its Action Plan also highlight the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality (Article 11) and the right to affordable long-term care services of good quality, in particular homecare and community-based services (Article 18).

When developing a European Care Strategy, focused on accessible, affordable, and sustainable quality social care and support services, the crucial role and contribution of the 11 million workers in the social services sector in the European Union and UK must be highlighted. Existing workforce challenges must be addressed.

1 There is no single, universally accepted definition for the terms "care" and "carer(s)" across Europe. A caregiver can be a family member, friend or neighbour. A caregiver can also be a trained professional.

2 [Commission Work Programme 2022](#).

# 2

## Social Care Services in Europe: State of Play

The social services sector is a significant economic and social contributor whose staff represents 4,7% of the total EU & UK workforce. The sector has seen an increase of 24% in the number of people employed between 2009 and 2018 while the entire EU workforce (at this time including UK) increased about 5% during the same period. However, over 421,000 social services workers have left the sector in the 2019 to 2020 period, most likely due to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>3</sup> Still, the sector is expected to recover and grow significantly in the next years and to hire many care workers; the Social Protection Committee estimates that up to 7 million job openings for healthcare associate professionals and personal care workers will be created by 2030.<sup>4</sup> In this context, the challenge for social services is to address the current and future staff shortages by filling the vacant job positions with sufficient and trained workforce.

Social services facilitate higher labour market participation and contribute to more inclusive labour markets. Childcare and long-term care services allow especially more women to enter the labour market, who otherwise often take on the biggest share of caring responsibilities within their families. In addition, social services can facilitate participation to the labour market for persons with disabilities, the long-term unemployed and migrants.

Higher employment rates facilitated through social services mean higher contributions to tax schemes and social protection systems.

Despite the social and economic contribution and an ever-growing demand, social services experience some major difficulties in terms of funding, staffing levels, recruitment and retention, gender balance, and an ageing workforce. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated many of the pre-existing difficulties.<sup>5</sup> Care workers were on the frontline throughout the pandemic, caring for the most vulnerable. The increased workload was both physically and mentally challenging. But despite being considered essential workers in many countries, social care workers were often marginalized and forgotten.<sup>6</sup> As a result, many are now suffering from demotivation and some of them from exhaustion or burnout and, as is shown above, hundreds of thousands are leaving the sector.

One of the key lessons to learn from the pandemic is that professions in the social services sector need to be better recognised and valued for their important contribution to the wellbeing of millions of Europeans in need of care and support. Better recognition also means that investment in social care is not considered a mere cost but seen as an investment in the future.

3 [https://www.epsu.org/sites/default/files/article/files/Resilience\\_of%20the%20LTC%20sector\\_V3.pdf](https://www.epsu.org/sites/default/files/article/files/Resilience_of%20the%20LTC%20sector_V3.pdf)

4 European Parliament, Study requested by the EMPL Committee: [Policies for long-term Carers](#) (2021).

5 FORBA (2021): Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on social services & the role of social dialogue.

6 Social Employers and EPSU [Joint Statement on the Covid-19 outbreak](#).

## A growing demand for social services

Over the next five decades, the number of Europeans aged 80+ is set to double.<sup>7</sup> The pool of informal carers is shrinking due to changing family patterns, with growing female employment and the increase in the retirement age. These developments have a range of consequences and present long-term care systems with a clear need to adapt to the growing demand and evolving needs. As demand for care services grow, there is increasing professionalisation of the sector.

## Funding

Social services often lack the financial resources to address the growing demand in care and the changing needs and requirements of service users. Underfunding limits pay levels and pay rises and therefore strongly works against the attractiveness of the sector. These financial constraints often lead to insufficient staff-user ratios, short-term and part-time contracts and low salaries, all adding to high turnover rates.

## Working Conditions

The social services sector is often associated to flexible working hours, lower pay compared to national average wages, and both emotionally and physically demanding working conditions.<sup>8</sup> Many employees stay in the sector for only a few years or are forced to shorten their working hours. Almost 40% of long-term care (LTC) workers feel their work has a negative impact on their health and feel unable to do the job until their 60.<sup>9</sup> This leads to high rates of absence due to sickness and an early exit from work. Improving working

conditions is essential to enhance recruitment and retention. Strengthening industrial relations and capacity building, recognising collective bargaining and social dialogue, are key to improving working conditions and the attractiveness of the sector.<sup>10</sup>

## Education, Skills & Training

The delivery of quality care services, which include advancements in digital technologies and changing support needs of people, requires a skilled and well-trained workforce fully recognised as such.<sup>11</sup> While there is a growing demand for care workers, some countries are currently dealing with a declining number of students aiming to become carers. After entering the sector, workforce training is essential for developing, enhancing and valuing the professional experience of the workers and ensuring an evolving career in the sector. Vocational education and training are a necessity for providing quality care. A female and ageing workforce.

Occupations in social services are among the most gender segregated occupations in the EU, with women making up 82% of the workforce. In personal care work, women make up 90% of employees. Efforts must be made to attract and recruit more men. Equal opportunities in the development of career paths for men and women, and equal pay for equal work, are important measures to ensure a more gender-balanced sector.

The workforce in the social services sector is also ageing. The share of LTC workers above 50 years increased from 28% in 2009 to 38% in 2019.<sup>12</sup> As a result, organisations face specific challenges in responding to older workers' needs, but also in recruiting new workers to replace those that retire.

7 According to Eurostat.

8 According to a Eurofound article from 2021, [wages in long-term care and other social services are 21% below average national hourly earnings](#).

9 Eurofound (2020): [Long-term care workforce: Employment and working conditions](#), Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

10 This is in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights (chapter II) and the proposal of the Commission on Adequate Minimum Wages that foresees improvements in collective bargaining coverage.

11 Social Employers (2021): [Survey on skills and training needs in the social services sector](#).

12 Eurofound (2020): [Long-term care workforce: Employment and working conditions](#), Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

# 3

## Recommendations for a European Care Strategy

A strong European Care Strategy should take the following points into consideration:

✓ **An integrated approach to care - healthcare and social care, informal and formal care, residential and home & community-based care**

Health and social services often go hand-in-hand, for example when it comes to care workers providing medical services outside of a hospital setting, in residential care or in the person's home. An integrated approach is needed, which looks at the experiences and needs of the care givers and receivers.

Without affordable and accessible formal care services, caring for aging adults and other vulnerable persons often falls on unpaid, untrained family members. An integrated approach would ensure that this type of care is a choice, accompanied by a range of formal care services that serve the interests of those being cared for, as well as those providing informal care.

People increasingly opt for care to be delivered in their own homes and in their communities rather than in residential settings. The shift towards home and community-based care

services requires specific adaptations and skills, which the care workforce has to be trained for. An integrated approach is needed to ensure social service workers delivering care in private homes benefit from the same health and safety procedures as those in residential care, as well as from social dialogue, collective bargaining and social protection.

An integrated care approach, taking into consideration preventive care as a key factor, requires proper conditions, including favourable frameworks in terms of legislation.

✓ **Quality working conditions and healthier workplaces to recruit and retain employees**

Working conditions and salaries in social care professions in many countries should be improved. This should include quality employment contracts, adequate staff-user ratios and regular assessments of health and safety risks at work. All actors and their representatives, from top management to frontline carers, and from all types of job positions, should be involved in the process to ensure healthy & safe working environments. Social dialogue and collective bargaining are key to improve working conditions.

✓ **Funding for social services as an investment in the future, not as a mere cost**

Social care work stands at the leading edge of a new wave of employment demand and job creation.<sup>13</sup> Member States should ensure sufficient funding that allows employers to provide higher wages that match the crucial contribution of care workers to society. Funding is necessary to establish adequate safe user-staff ratios which will improve working conditions and allow workers to adequately respond to users' needs. This will only become more important as the demand for elderly care grows. Funding is also crucial for career path development, training and lifelong learning, and the digital and green transition of the sector. These factors will make the sector more attractive and will therefore help tackle problems with recruitment and retention.

✓ **Re-skilling and upskilling of social care workers**

Re-skilling and upskilling are important to meet current and future needs of the sector, for example in the context of new models of care delivery (move to community-based services), to be able to better manage crises in the future (e.g., training on safety protocols, managing psychosocial risk, etc.) and to prepare for the digital and green transition as well as to deliver quality services. The value of micro-credentials needs to be recognised. Micro credentials give groups who are disadvantaged in the labour market - such as people with disabilities or migrants - quicker and easier access to paid work. People who want to switch to the social sector and who, as a breadwinner, cannot afford to do a lengthy study also benefit from micro credentials.<sup>14</sup>

✓ **The need to improve the public's image of care work and its value to society**

Member States should make efforts to improve the public's image of care work and highlight its value to society. Efforts must be made to move away from stereotypical attitudes towards care and the caring profession, in order to overcome the gender gap, employ a more diverse workforce (men, migrants, second-career workers, etc.), and ensure equal opportunities in career paths. Care work, its professions and career prospects should be widely communicated about, to raise awareness and visibility towards national authorities and the public.

✓ **Investment in and use of technological and social innovations**

Social interaction and human contact are at the core of care work and are the ground for social innovation. New digital technologies can be a tool for social innovation, and can enhance working conditions, efficiency, service delivery and the quality of life of service users. This transition is only possible when meeting the investment needs, especially in terms of financing of IT equipment, devices and workforce training on how to use them. Social partners should be involved throughout all stages of the transition.

13 Global Coalition on Ageing (2021): [Building the Caregiving Workforce our Ageing World Needs](#).

14 See also [Social Employers position on a European Approach to Micro-Credentials](#) (2021).

✓ **The importance of developing social dialogue and supporting collective bargaining**

The actors best able to drive the sector forward and address the challenges at hand are the social partners – employers and trade unions. Reinforcing a constructive and regular social dialogue in social services, both at national and EU level, is crucial to steer developments in the sector into a sustainable direction. Social partners in Member States with well-established social dialogue and collective bargaining report much better working conditions and more resources than social partners in countries where such framework conditions are not in place.<sup>15</sup> European social dialogue can also contribute to the improvement of working conditions, help share promising practices and develop guidelines to inspire national social dialogue.<sup>16</sup> For these reasons, the Social Employers and EPSU have recently submitted their official request to the European Commission for setting up a dedicated sectoral social dialogue committee for social services.<sup>17</sup>

✓ **Social care for a sustainable future**

Social care is a key player to implement the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Indeed, a sustainable future not only consists of environmental protection, but also of inclusive and sustainable economic growth, social cohesion, and the fight against growing inequalities.

✓ **A follow-up mechanism on the implementation of the Strategy**

A European Care Strategy should contain concrete objectives, implemented by an action plan, and a mechanism for follow-up, including timeframes and indicators. This will allow to track developments in the Member States, e.g., via the European Semester. The sectoral Social Partners, the Federation of European Social Employers and EPSU, expect to be part of this follow up mechanism with regular reports from the Commission for social dialogue.

15 Eurofound (2018): [Exploring the connections between EU- and national-level social dialogue](#), Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

16 For example, see Social Employers & EPSU social dialogue activities <http://socialemmployers.eu/en/social-dialogue/> and our recent [Joint Webinar on Preventing Musculoskeletal Disorders](#) held in the framework of the EU-OSHA “Healthy Workplaces – Lighten the Load” Campaign.

17 Press Release (October 2021): [The Social Employers and EPSU apply for a European Sectoral Social Dialogue Committee for Social Services](#).





The Federation of European Social Employers is the voice of employers in the field of social services at European level and has, according to Eurofound, the most significant employer's representativeness in the private sector part of social services. The Social Employers understand social services to comprise all care and support services, especially for older persons, persons with disabilities, children, and other excluded or disadvantaged persons.

The Federation's objectives are to strengthen the position of employers in social services at European and national level, establish common positions between members, and negotiate with European Trade Union Associations, representing workers in social services. By doing so, the Social Employers contribute to quality service provision and quality jobs.



The European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU) brings together trade unions from across Europe and represents over 8 million public service workers. It is the most representative European trade union organisation in the social services sector. EPSU works hard to deliver better working conditions, improved health and safety and enhanced rights for its members. By sitting down with employers at European level, we negotiate best practice agreements that improve the working lives of public service workers and ensure quality services for citizens.



*With financial support from the European Union*

## **EUROPEAN PUBLIC SERVICE UNION**

Rue Joseph II, 40, Box 5  
1000 Brussels  
[www.epsu.org](http://www.epsu.org)

## **FEDERATION OF EUROPEAN SOCIAL EMPLOYERS**

Handelsstraat / Rue du Commerce 72  
1040 Brussels  
[www.socialemployers.eu](http://www.socialemployers.eu)



*With financial support from the European Union*