

Social Employers Position Paper

New Action Plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights

9th September 2025

Summary

The Social Employers welcome the European Commission's initiative to develop a new Action Plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). This represents an opportunity to strengthen social rights, improve working conditions, and enhance the sustainability of Europe's social model. Building on lessons learned from the first Action Plan (2021–2024), the new framework must place greater emphasis on **access to quality social services, including long-term care and early childhood education and care, creating quality jobs, workforce sustainability and social dialogue**. The new Plan should be both ambitious and practical, making sure that social rights lead to real improvements for people, workers, and service providers.

Introduction

The European Pillar of Social Rights is the EU's blueprint for a fairer and more inclusive Europe, designed to protect citizens and improve living and working conditions. The forthcoming Action Plan is supposed to guide EU countries in achieving the 2030 headline targets for employment, skills, and poverty reduction.

The EU is close to achieving its employment target, with a rate of 75.3% in 2023 compared with the 2030 goal of 78%. However, significant progress is still needed on skills and poverty reduction: in 2022, only 39.5% of adults participated in training every year (compared with the 60% goal), and the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion has decreased by just 1.6 million, while the target is 15 million.

The European Commission's Call for Evidence invites stakeholders to contribute perspectives on the implementation of the 2021 Action Plan and the priorities for the new one. As the voice of social services employers across the EU, the **Social Employers submit this contribution to highlight the experiences, needs, and priorities of the sector's employers**.

1. Feedback on the 2021 Action Plan implementation

The 2021 Action Plan was followed by key initiatives, including the European Care Strategy to ensure quality, affordable and accessible care services across the European Union, and two Council recommendations, on Early Childhood Education and Care and on Long-Term Care. To address the workforce challenges in the sector, the Commission also established a Sectoral Social Dialogue Committee for Social Services in 2023. However, while the 2021 Action Plan was ambitious, implementation revealed several shortcomings:

- Insufficient coverage of key principles:
 - Principle 18 – Long-term care: The adoption of the European Care Strategy was an important step forward, but to make real progress it now needs stronger investment, faster reforms, and more consistent implementation across Member States.
 - Principle 11 – Childcare and support to children: in many countries, this sector is in crisis despite its key role in poverty prevention.
 - Principle 19 – Housing and homelessness: Fragmented implementation led to rising homelessness. The forthcoming European affordable housing plan may help but will need a strong involvement from the Member States.
 - Principle 6 – Wages: Social services, despite being the sector most active in implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights, face a major challenge when it comes to their own workforce. For the 10 million people employed in the sector across the EU, hourly wages remain around 20% below the average, largely due to insufficient investment and ongoing budget cuts.
 - Principle 8 – Social dialogue: In several Member States, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, social dialogue in the social services sector remains weak and social services employers are often not adequately included in policymaking.
 - Principle 20 – Access to essential services: Accessibility to essential social services is impacted by underinvestment, which prevents the growing needs of populations from being met.

Progress has faced challenges due to structural factors, such as the need for stronger coordination between EU institutions and Member States, varying levels of political support for social policy reforms, and the EU's limited competences in social and employment policy. As a result, while the Action Plan recognised progress, it needs stronger tools and support to deliver real improvements for people.

2. Priorities for the New Action Plan

Access to high-quality, affordable and accessible care services, including long-term care and early childhood education and care.

The European Care Strategy, launched in 2022, sets out objectives regarding long-term care (for persons with disabilities and older persons) and childcare, part of the EPSR principles. However, the growing demand for care services, for children, persons with disabilities and older adults among others, does not appear to be receiving sufficient attention from Member States.

Here the Commission will need to convince Member States to expand and improve their offer of services, not only out of solidarity with their own citizens, but also because investing on care services contributes to their competitiveness and GDP growth in the medium and long term.

Regarding the workforce challenges, in the Framework of Actions on Retention and Recruitment in Social Services, signed together with EPSU in June 2025, the Social Employers call on Member States to take concrete measures to improve staff retention and recruitment in social services.

Ensuring Quality Jobs: Building Blocks for the new Action Plan

The new Action Plan should address key challenges and provide the building blocks for stronger competitiveness, employment, and social standards without adding administrative burden. The forthcoming Quality Jobs Roadmap has strong links with the EPSR implementation.

The actions should include:

- Ensuring adequate funding for all social services allowing to pay fair wages, ensure safe staffing levels, and offer training and career opportunities.
- Improving working conditions to create safe and healthy workplaces, including mental health.
- Improving education and training for all ages to ensure a skilled workforce (the Social Employers is part of the Large-Scale Partnership for Skills in Long-Term Care, which aims to support achieving the target of 60% of staff participating in training every year).
- Supporting female labour market participation, including access to childcare and long-term care.
- Expanding access to affordable housing, in particular for essential workers.
- Supporting the participation in the labour market for all.
- Strengthening social dialogue and collective bargaining.

Strengthening Engagement and Implementation

For the new Action Plan to deliver tangible results, it must persuade Member States that putting the European Pillar of Social Rights into practice is not a cost but a long-term investment. Embedding implementation in national multi-annual strategies will ensure durability and ownership. The Social Employers therefore call for:

- Reinforcing measurable benchmarks with transparent reporting, such as the EU Social Score Board, which could be improved by monitoring more closely the implementation of the 20 EPSR principles, to compare progress across Member States and create a peer review platform for policymakers, providers, and social partners to share good practices.
- Strengthening measurement of social investment, peer learning and communication to raise awareness and build public and political support on the EPSR implementation.
- Linking strong and accessible EU funding to concrete social outcomes, with priority to workforce sustainability and long-term care reforms.
- Guaranteeing respect for and implementation of social dialogue outcomes and involvement of Social Partners.

Conclusion

The new Action Plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights presents an opportunity to strengthen Europe's social model and deliver real improvements for citizens, persons needing support and workers. For the social services sector, this means tackling chronic workforce shortages, investing in long-term care and other social services, and making the sector more attractive and sustainable through sufficient funding, enabling it to meet current challenges, particularly the needs of an ageing EU population.

The Social Employers call on the European Commission to ensure that the new Action Plan combines ambition with practical measures to be implemented by Member States, grounded in social dialogue and supported by sustainable funding.

The Federation of European Social Employers (the Social Employers) represents social services employers at the European level. It defines social services as care and support for older people, persons with disabilities, children, and other disadvantaged persons. The Federation's goals are to strengthen employers' positions at both European and national levels, develop common positions among members, and engage in dialogue with European trade unions. In doing so, the Social Employers support quality services and quality jobs in the sector.

