



THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL SERVICES

Overview of Eurodiaconia membership services and best practices



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Eurodiaconia is a European network of churches and Christian NGOs providing social and healthcare services and advocating social justice.

ORGANISATION VALUES



OUR MISSION AND VISION

Inspired by our Christian faith, our vision is of a Europe where social injustice is eradicated and each person is valued, included, and empowered to realize their fullest potential, particularly the most vulnerable and marginalized. Together we work for just and transformative social change across Europe.

WHO WE ARE

Eurodiaconia is a growing European network of churches and Christian NGOs with 61 national and regional organisations providing social and healthcare services, as well as advocating for social justice. Eurodiaconia members provide diverse services to persons in need, working to see everyone live in dignity and their human rights are respected and protected. Services offered range from health care, childcare, elderly care, hospice and palliative care, youth inclusion programmes, employment and inclusion services to vulnerable groups such as migrants and Roma, housing services for persons experiencing homelessness and services to persons with disabilities. Eurodiaconia represents over 33000 service centres, with approximately 1000000 staff and over a million volunteers are involved in providing diaconal services. For example one of our members Diakonie Deutschland is one of the largest providers of facilities for the care, support and persons in need in Germany. It offers 33.374 services and has a capacity of 1.18 million beds/spaces, it employs approximately 627.349 qualified staff and has over 700.000 volunteers. Similarly, one of our members in Czechia, Slezska Diakonie, is one of the largest non-profit organisations providing quality social services in Český Těšín region. It offers more than 100 social services in more than 60 centres and has over 1200 employees. In France, our member Fédération de l'Entraide Protestante (FEP) represents approximately 370 member associations and foundations and provides more than 1000 services, with 24.000 employees and over 15.000 volunteers. These three organisations are just examples of the breadth of the delivery of the mission and vision of Eurodiaconia.

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INTRODUCTION

1. SOCIAL SERVICES IN CONTEXT

A DIVERSITY OF DEFINITION AND AN EVOLVING FRAMEWORK

Currently, there are significant challenges in interpreting social services at the EU level, as each member state organizes, classifies, and delivers these services according to their national realities and traditions. Consequently, there is no common definition of social services across EU member states. The European framework rests on the European Commission's definition of Services of General Interest (SSGI) fall under the broader category of Services of General Interest (SGI), which can be either economic (Social Services of General Economic Interest – SGEI) or non-economic¹. This different categorizations have legal consequences: Although social services are primarily the responsibility of Member States, they must comply with EU legislation, including internal market and competition rules, when these services are of an economic nature. Member States have the primary responsibility for social policies, skills and employment. However, Since the 2004 White Paper on SGI, the European Commission has worked to define the specific characteristics of social services within the broader context of SGI². Advocacy by EU civil society organizations, such as Social Platform and Social Services Europe, has led to EU legislators recognizing the unique aspects of social services, resulting in adaptations to EU rules. These adaptations include exceptions, exemptions, or the softening of internal market and competition rules applicable to social services. Notable developments include the revised directive on public procurement (Directive 2014/24/EU) and the Almunia package on state aid rules.

SOCIAL SERVICES: THE BASIS OF SOCIAL COHESION AND RESILIENCE

Social services are essential to ensuring social inclusion, supporting vulnerable communities, and fostering resilience across Europe. Social Services are at the heart of the ambition for a social Europe as reiterated in the La Hulpe Declaration, social services are crucial for both social and territorial cohesion and sustainable competitiveness³. They empower people to be equal participants in our societies, provide care and support and are also significant employers across Europe. As not-for-profit social service providers, Eurodiaconia members are on the frontlines of delivering crucial care and support to millions of individuals, filling gaps left by public services and responding to the evolving needs of our communities. Eurodiaconia's mission aligns with the European Union's commitment to social justice, as outlined in the European Pillar of Social Rights⁴, - a framework that guarantees the right to access affordable, available, and high-quality social services, yet current EU legislative initiatives still fall short of realising this vision in practice.

1 [Services of general interest](#)

2 [White Paper On SGI, the European Commission has worked to define the specific characteristics of social services within the broader context of SGI](#)

3 [La Hulpe Declaration on the Future of the European Pillar of Social Rights](#)

4 [European Pillar of Social Rights](#)

WHAT WE DO

In 2019 Eurodiaconia established a High-level expert group on social services consisting of key service providers, the group has since then been active in discussing trends that affect the provision of social services. The High-level expert group report published in 2021 on Social Services addresses several trends that influence the provision of social services. As not-for profit social and health care service providers, Eurodiaconia members work at the heart of communities, delivering essential and enabling services that empower individuals and vulnerable persons to foster social inclusion and resilience. Our work contributes directly to the EU's strategic goals of promoting cohesion, reducing inequalities, and ensuring that no one is left behind as outlined in the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Building on the report produced in 2021, the Eurodiaconia high-level expert group on social services decided to develop a policy paper on some of the key trends in social services, to use as an advocacy tool post 2024 EU elections.

This policy paper therefore explores the evolving landscape of social services in Europe emphasising the growing importance of social investment, support for social innovation, the need for policies that support sustainable financing of social services and the crucial need for favourable legal framework for social services.

2. SOCIAL SERVICES UNDER PRESSURE: SHIFTING SANDS

A review of the political guidelines for the next European Commission 2024-2029 released by the Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen⁵ reveals a concerning lack of focus on social services at a time when they are critically needed. Europe has recently navigated a series of crises, including the economic fallout from COVID-19, the high cost of living affecting low-income households, and the ongoing Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine. While defense, competitiveness, and productivity remain top priorities in Europe, the demand for social services, particularly long-term care due to demographic changes and an ageing population, continues to rise. At the same time, social service providers are under pressure from shrinking public financing, the need to become more sustainable amidst insufficient funds and difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified workforce.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL SERVICES

At the time the EU accelerates towards dual Green and digital transitions, it is more important than ever to prioritise investment in social services. National governments must recognise that investing in social services is not only a moral imperative but also a strong and profitable long-term investment. Social services play a crucial role in enhancing people's lives and are a fundamental component of social protection systems across the EU. They are instrumental in promoting social inclusion and cohesion while aligning with the EU's political commitments. They are vital to a social Europe⁶. The recent Eurobarometer report reveals that 88% Europeans across Europe consider social Europe to be important to them personally (i.e. a Europe that is committed to equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions, social protection and inclusion)⁷.

5 [Political Guidelines 2024 - 2029](#)

6 [Hemerijck, A., Ronchi, & Plavgo, I. \(2023\). Social Investment as a conceptual framework for analysing Well-being returns and reforms in 21st century welfare states. Socio-Economic Review, 21](#)

7 [Eurobarometer - Social Europe](#)

A COMPLEX, EVOLVING, REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

The organisation, delivery, and funding of social services falls under the competence of Member States, often decided at sub-national or regional levels. However, Member States are expected to comply with EU law when a service constitutes an economic activity. The complex interplay between different levels of governance; EU, national, regional, and local creates a fragmented landscape for social services provision, not only across Member States but also within regions and between urban and rural areas.

Therefore, it is essential to have a comprehensive understanding of social services in all their forms. This includes the regulatory frameworks governing their financing and delivery, the various types of providers involved, and the tools used to define, measure, and evaluate the impact and quality of social services.

FACING SPENDING CUTS

The current eco-system for social services does not sufficiently enable many providers to recruit and retain the staff needed, financing is increasingly complex amidst cuts and fears of further cuts in public spending. Social services need an enabling legal framework, support in digitalisation and in incorporating social innovation. In July 2024, seven countries were found by the European Union (Ecofin Council, bringing together the ministers for economy of all Member States) to run excessive deficits and the countries have expressed plans to cut down on public spending. ⁸In the event of budgetary cuts, social services are often amongst the first to take the hit.

UNDER INCREASING PRESSURE

In this context, sustainability is emerging as an additional critical challenge for social and health service providers, particularly in the context of a just environmental transition. As many of these providers serve vulnerable populations, they are increasingly recognizing that climate change and environmental degradation disproportionately affect the communities they support.

The integration of environmental sustainability into their service delivery is vital not only to reduce the environmental impact of their operations but also to address the broader social justice implications of climate change. By doing so, these organizations can ensure that they continue fulfilling their mission to serve the most marginalized populations while contributing to global efforts to mitigate environmental damage.

To support social and health service providers in embracing the transition, the EU and its member states should implement policies that enable long-term investments in sustainable infrastructure. This includes providing access to funding for green technologies, renewable energy installations, and energy-efficient facilities. For example, funding opportunities must be developed to better support social services' transition to sustainable operations.

8 [Stability and growth pact: Excessive deficit procedures](#)

ADDRESSING KEY CHALLENGES AND MOVING FORWARD

1. ADEQUATE FUNDING: A MUST FOR QUALITY SERVICE DELIVERY

Since the 2007- 2008 financial crisis, EU member states have faced significant fiscal challenges, leading to substantial cuts in public spending. These austerity measures have disproportionately impacted social services, which are the bedrock of the welfare state and vital for ensuring the well-being and social cohesion of communities across the region. Reductions in funding have strained social and healthcare systems, diminished support for vulnerable persons, and limited access to essential services such as education, housing, and unemployment assistance. As economies grapple with recovery and growth, the erosion of social services threatens to undermine progress by exacerbating social inequalities and reducing the quality of life for millions of persons. Enrico Letta's "Much more than a Market report" highlights how underinvestment in Services of General Interest such as healthcare, education and infrastructure is creating a significant barrier to the EU's economic goals⁹. As such, ensuring resilience and sustainability of social services require adequate and sustainable financing. Sufficient finance is vital for ensuring the future provision of social services, but a shortage of funding poses a threat to the sustainability of care and other essential social services. In current times, public spending and investment in social services has not improved amidst increasing demand. Eurodiaconia members experience first-hand the effects of cuts in public spending. In Germany, the state budget planned for 2025 foresees immense cuts in some social services from 13 million in the current year to 7 million¹⁰.

Services most affected are aid to the long-term unemployed as well as integration courses for migrants, even though the present political situation makes it unlikely that this budget will be eventually passed by parliament, a new government may agree on far-reaching cuts in the social sector. Our Finnish member reports similar cuts in public spending for social and health care services for example in housing allowance and unemployment benefits.

These cuts have a devastating ripple effect on the society such as increasing child poverty, health inequalities, low education levels, financial difficulties associated with insecurity, mental health problems and a risk of more people unfit for work¹¹. EU Funds, such as the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) which is the main instrument for investing in people signal an important recognition of the role social services play in fostering social cohesion and addressing inequalities.

The ESF+¹², aims to boost social inclusion projects and improve service access. However, while these initiatives have provided some financial support, they have not sufficiently addressed the persistent structural issues, such as variable quality, affordability, underfunding, workforce shortages, and unequal access to social services across Member States. The promise of affordable and accessible quality social services is still unmet for many people, particularly the most vulnerable.

9 [Enrico Letta: Much More Than A Market, Speed, Security, Solidarity, Empowering the single market to deliver a sustainable future and prosperity for all EU Citizens.](#)

10 <https://www.diakonie.de/informieren/infothek/2024/august/standard-titel/bundeshaushalt-2025-spitzenverbaende-der-freien-wohlfahrtspflege-fordern-investitionen-statt-kuerzungen>

11 [Government cuts hurt all Finns, including children and the middle class, says researcher | University of Helsinki](#)

12 [European Social Fund Plus](#)

Moreover, while another EU instrument, the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), has directed significant financial resources towards healthcare and social services in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the sustainability of these investments remains in question. Expenditures within RRF are expected to end in 2026, with the risk that without long-term legislative reform, these temporary funds will fail to create accessible and affordable social services capable of meeting Europe's growing demands. It is important to note in addition that the RRF is based on borrowing, and will have to be paid back. By its nature it therefore contribute to fiscal austerity and future cuts in social spending. It can't be the solution.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO MEMBER STATES AND THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

1. **Prioritise Investment in Social Services:**

EU member states should re-evaluate their fiscal policies to prioritise investment in social services. This includes ensuring adequate funding for care services, healthcare, education, housing, and unemployment assistance. By investing in these areas, governments can mitigate the adverse effects of austerity measures, reduce social inequalities, and promote overall well-being and social cohesion. For instance, reversing cuts in aid for the long-term unemployed and integration courses for migrants, as seen in Germany, can help foster a more inclusive and resilient society.

2. **Implement Targeted Support Programs:**

To address the specific needs of vulnerable populations, EU member states should develop and implement targeted support programs. These programs could focus on providing additional resources for child poverty reduction, mental health services, and financial assistance for those facing economic insecurity. By tailoring support to the most affected groups, such as those highlighted in Finland's cuts to housing allowance and unemployment benefits, governments can more effectively address the root causes of social disparities and enhance the quality of life for all persons.

2. AN ENABLING LEGAL FRAMEWORK AS A BEDROCK FOR SOCIAL SERVICES

The current legal frameworks governing the provision of social services at the EU level remain fragmented and insufficient. While progress has been made, there is still no comprehensive, EU-wide policy that ensures social services are truly affordable, accessible, and of high quality. Gaps in the legal framework leave critical issues unresolved, from workforce conditions to sustainable financing, resulting in inconsistent and some cases shrinking service delivery across regions and Member States. As social service providers, Eurodiaconia members continue to face significant challenges; worsening workforce shortages, and funding has not improved. The growing complexity of social needs requiring more robust, long-term legislative action at the EU level. The absence of clear enforceable, harmonised standards across Member States undermines efforts to ensure that everyone, regardless of location or socio-economic status, can access the services they need.

LEGAL FRAMEWORKS GOVERNING THE PROVISION OF SOCIAL SERVICES

Public Procurement:

Public Procurement refers to the processes through which national and public authorities such as local authorities or government departments purchase goods and services from external suppliers. It is governed by principles of non-discrimination, transparency and equal treatment. Public procurement constitutes a substantial part of the Gross Domestic Product in the EU, accounting for around €2 trillion (approximately 14%) spent annually¹³. Public Procurement rules serve both as a technical and a policy instrument within EU law to create a level playing field for business across Europe. However there are exemptions as that are applicable to social services. For instance Article 20, of the EU Directive on Public Procurement 2014/24/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council¹⁴ allows to reserve the participation in specific procurement procedures for specific bidders that are themselves social enterprises engaged in the inclusion of handicapped or disadvantaged persons into employment.

*"Member States may reserve the right to participate in public procurement procedures to sheltered workshops and economic operators whose main aim is the social and professional integration of disabled or disadvantaged persons or may provide for such contracts to be performed in the context of sheltered employment programmes, provided that at least 30% of the employees of those workshops, economic operators or programmes are disabled or disadvantaged workers."(2) *The call for competition shall make reference to this Article*

Similarly, Article 77 states that "Member States may provide that contracting authorities may reserve the right for organisations to participate in procedures for the award of public contracts exclusively for those health, social and cultural services referred to in Article 74"¹⁵

The Directive further lays down conditions for the organisations mentioned in the Article 77 for instance- profits made is reinvested with the view of achieving the organisations's objective, the structure of management or ownership of the organisation is based on employee ownership or participatory principles or require the active participation of employees, users or stakeholders. The organisation has not been awarded a contract for the services concerned by the contracting authority within the past three years. Also, the maximum duration of the contract shall not be longer than three years.

Although the directive sets the minimum standards Member states are not under any obligation to implement the set rules. There is enormous room for flexibility in interpretation which can be problematic as echoed by Eurodiaconia members. Our members say contracting authorities still award tenders above the EU thresholds solely on the basis of the lowest price or cost. This implies that quality criteria and social, environmental and innovation considerations are not included in tender documents.

13 [European Commission Single Market Scoreboard](#)

14 [The EU Directive on Public Procurement 2014/24/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council](#)

15 The ECJ has approved of this form of reserved contract in its decision C 436/20 (ASADE)

MAKE STATE AID WORK FOR SOCIAL SERVICES:

State aid is defined by the European Commission as an advantage in any form whatsoever conferred by national public authorities to undertakings on a selective basis. Therefore, subsidies granted to individuals or general measures open to all enterprises are not covered by this prohibition and do not constitute State Aid (examples include general taxation measures or employment legislation).¹⁷

According to some Eurodiaconia members, many public authorities are yet to fully implement state aid rules; instead, they tend to focus only on de minimis regulations for Services of General Economic Interest (SGEI). De minimis Regulation exempts small aid amounts from the scope of EU State aid control because they are deemed to have no impact on competition and trade in the internal market.¹⁸

It seems public authorities have very little awareness of the wide range of diverse state aid rules, they tend to focus only on de minimis declarations. According to our German member Diakonie Deutschland, the SGEI- de minimis threshold of 500.000 EUR within three years is too low for many social services given that it is linked to the state aid notion of the undertaking. An undertaking can consist of several enterprises. Consequently, all the enterprises are categorized as one undertaking if there is a certain level of control and interdependency. In this way, an undertaking can easily go above the threshold of 500.000 EUR. Furthermore, for a correct implementation of state aid rules, service providers often need intensive legal advice to prepare the required acts of entrustment and to ensure compliance, including with reference to the taxability of acts of entrustment as VAT-relevant.¹⁹

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

- Revise State Aid rules, to make them simpler and in particular to increase the SGEI de minimis threshold from 500.000EUR to 800.000EUR per undertaking per year.
- In order to ensure the effective, transparent and unbureaucratic provision of social services on the one hand and compliance with EU State aid rules on the other, we underline the need for all actors not only to lawfully apply the EU State Aid Rules, but also to simplify their application in practice to work in the ground and to support an effective delivery of social services of general interest. These adaptations concern both the general de minimis Regulation (1407/2013) and the SGEI de minimis Regulation (360/2012).

3. RECOGNISING AND ENABLING SOCIAL INVESTMENT

According to the recent Employment and Social Developments in Europe (ESDE) report 2024, social investment including reforms and investment in up-and re-skilling, lifelong learning, active labour market policies, early childhood education and care can contribute to upward social convergence in the EU. Affordable housing and social protection complement social investment policies and can lead to better labour markets and social outcomes. A recent survey also shows strong public

¹⁷ [European Commission State Aid Overview](#)

¹⁸ [State Aid Regulations](#)

¹⁹ [The Future of Social Services Report of the High-Level Group on social services](#)

support among Europeans for social investment. The respondents say EU should focus investment in health care, education, training, lifelong learning and employment support. Moreover, 78% of Europeans believe that public spending on key social policies should increase.²⁰

In the last decade, the European Commission encouraged Member States to introduce new policy approaches, such as social investment and social innovation, that have an important impact on the organisation, provision, and funding of social services. While there is no commonly agreed definition of social investment yet²¹, this paper goes with the European Commission's definition in its Social Investment Package of 2013 which defines social investment as policies designed to strengthen people's present and future skills and capabilities and to support them to participate fully in employment and social life.

Social investment consists of integrated policies that focus on preparing people to confront life's risks and stages (e.g. unemployment, sickness, disability, maternity and parenthood, insufficient income, childhood and old age) instead of repairing their consequences.

Designing policies embedding preventative approaches is of paramount importance. Key policy areas that promote social investment generally include education, quality childcare, healthcare, training, job-search assistance and rehabilitation, and housing.²² One of the primary arguments for increased social investment is the role it plays in fostering inclusive growth. Social services such as healthcare, education, and welfare support enable individuals to participate fully in society and the labour market. For instance, investment in quality childcare and early education not only improves children's development but also enables parents, particularly women, to re-enter the workforce. This is corroborated in the ESDE report- returns on social investment are typically more substantial when they target early stages of life such as Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), education and training.²³

Likewise, accessible healthcare ensures that people can remain healthy and productive throughout their lives. By reducing barriers to employment and improving productivity, social investments can drive sustainable economic growth while reducing inequalities. It plays a key role in delivering the European Pillar of Social Rights and its Action Plan. It should be noted that social services are fundamental to ensure the implementation of at least 10 principles of the pillar.

20 <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&furtherNews=yes&newsId=10509>

21 [ESDE report](#)

22 [European Commission, Communication "Towards Social Investment for Growth and Cohesion – including implementing the European Social Fund 2014-2020", 20 February 2013, COM \(2013\) 83; see European Commission website](#)

23 [ESDE report page 15](#)

Quality social services are fundamental to ensure the implementation of at least 10 principles within the EPSR:

- **Principle 01** – Social services assist in the achievement of inclusive education, training and lifelong learning by supporting all people to have access to such opportunities.
- **Principle 02** – Social services support gender equality by providing care and support to enable parents or family members, often women, the choice to work if they wish to.
- **Principle 03** – Social services support equal opportunities by helping all people to access employment, social protection, education and access to goods and services.
- **Principle 04** – Social services assist in active support to employment by providing personalised, continuous and consistent support to help disadvantaged persons onto the labour market.
- **Principle 09** – Social services support work-life balance by providing care services to those who need it.
- **Principle 11** – Social services provide childcare and support to children by providing childcare services to those who need it, as well as additional support for disadvantaged children and/or families.
- **Principle 17** – Social services support the inclusion of people with disabilities by providing services that enable people with disabilities to participate in society and in the labour market.
- **Principle 18** – Social services support the provision of long-term care by providing quality, community-based long-term care services to people who need it.
- **Principle 19** – Social services assist the provision of housing and assistance for the homeless by providing support services for homeless people.
- **Principle 20** – Social services help to increase access to essential services by helping disadvantaged people access such service

Source: Social Services Europe-Towards the Implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights-the role of social services

Moreso, social investment is needed in building resilient economies and societies that can withstand future crises ensuring no one is left behind. Lessons from the 2008 financial crisis and of the COVID-19 pandemic reveal the critical role played by strongly financed and responsive welfare states. Robust social protection systems, adequate public and social services, as well as temporary support for impacted sectors are essential prerequisites for effectively absorbing systemic shocks.²⁴

Moreover, The High-Level Group on the future of social protection and of the welfare state in its report. The future of social protection and of the Welfare state in the EU proposed a golden rule should be applied, allowing borrowing for social investment in a starting phase at least, for investment in social infrastructure.²⁵ Studies reveal that countries with well-developed welfare systems like Sweden and Denmark, consistently rank high in terms of economic competitiveness, innovation and quality of life.

²⁶These countries have demonstrated that it is possible to combine strong social safety nets with well

²⁴ [EPC :Making the EU fit for the permacrisis](#)

²⁵ [Report of the High-Level Group on the future of social protection and of the welfare state in the EU](#)

²⁶ [OECD, \(2019\). OECD Economic Surveys :Denmark](#)

performing economic system.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO MEMBER STATES AND EUROPEAN COMMISSION

- Increase investment in areas with high social returns like early childhood education, healthcare, long-term care, affordable housing, lifelong learning, and all services that empower people to live in dignity in the face of green and digital transitions.
- Ensure the European Semester and economic governance allows fiscal flexibility permanent for social investment, given the demonstrated value of social investment in addressing crises like the COVID-19 crisis, solidify EU fiscal support for social investment beyond temporary relief measures.
- Implement and promote policies to increase the availability of affordable childcare, which can help parents, especially mothers, participate in the labour market thus boosting productivity and economic growth

4. PROMOTING SOCIAL INNOVATION AND AIDING DIGITALISATION OF SOCIAL SERVICES

Social innovation has become an essential element in Europe's strategy to boost competitiveness and resilience, particularly in the face of pressing social challenges. It is defined by the European Commission as the development of new ideas and practices to address unmet social needs and enhance well-being, social innovation not only addresses immediate social issues but also strengthens the social fabric necessary for sustained economic growth. ²⁷The Mario Draghi report on "The Future of European Competitiveness" underscores this perspective, emphasizing that Europe's global competitiveness hinges not only on technological advancement but also on the ability of public administrations to deliver high-quality public goods-especially in areas like health, education, welfare and environmental protection.²⁸

Digitalisation, a central theme of the Draghi report, is essential to social innovation in the public sector, with a particular focus on leveraging AI, data analytics, and remote care to improve service efficiency and reach. While healthcare has seen significant advancements with digitalisation, social services are now catching up but there are unique challenges to be faced.

Eurodiaconia members are working to bridge this gap by introducing digital tools in social care. For example Diakonie Austria's client-centered approach integrates digital applications for asylum seekers and refugees, highlighting that involving clients in digital tools can improve service-outcomes and user engagement. Similarly, Diaconia ECCB in the Czech Republic is advancing digitalisation through electronic documentation and training platforms, underscoring how technology can support efficiency while empowering staff and clients.

In elderly care, our member Evangelische Heimstiftung incorporates the use of specialised tablets to enhance safety of residents. The device detects and alerts carers in the event of inactivity of any resident. Also, aligning to the social innovation wave, Eurodiaconia launched its Social Innovation Hub²⁹ showcasing the work of its members across Europe using social innovation to transform service

²⁷ [European Commission-Social Innovation](#)

²⁸ [The future of European Competitiveness, Mario Draghi](#)

²⁹ [Eurodiaconia's Social Innovation Hub](#)

delivery in diverse fields, including healthcare, youth support and elderly care. Social innovation here goes beyond addressing current needs; it builds adaptive, resilient systems that can respond to evolving societal demands. Projects featured in the Hub illustrate how social innovation can be a catalyst for addressing broader EU priorities, from digital transformation to social inclusion.

However, significant challenges still hinder social innovation's progress, particularly within current economic realities. A primary setback is the lack of financial resources, a difficulty that becomes even more pronounced during times of austerity when funding for social services is limited. This financial strain combined with widespread staff shortages and a lack of qualified personnel, limits organizations' capacity to develop, implement, and sustain innovative solutions effectively. Even when successful initiatives are introduced, the high costs of expanding and maintaining these solutions often restrict their wider application, raising concerns about long-term sustainability.

Furthermore, rapid technological advancements demand that social service providers constantly adapt, requiring ongoing investment in training, infrastructure, and digital tools to stay current. Together, these challenges create a demanding environment for driving effective social innovation, highlighting the need for stable funding and supportive policies that enable sustainable, scalable solutions across Europe.

5. THE NEED FOR QUALITY SOCIAL SERVICES:

Quality is at the core of diaconia services, Eurodiaconia members believe social services should be of good quality. The Voluntary European Quality Framework for Social services (VEQFSS) established in 2010, aimed at developing a common understanding on the quality of social services introduced overarching principles like availability, accessibility, affordability, comprehensiveness, continuity, outcome-oriented and person-centeredness. However, only few countries have integrated its principles. More countries need further incentives and support to fully ensure that quality social services are both accessible and effective. As such, challenges persist, including varying quality standards, demographic changes, digitalisation disparities and the often sacrifice of quality in public procurement by contracting authorities.

Besides incentives, quality social services require adequate investment, qualified workforce, and active user involvement.

USERS INVOLVEMENT

To meet the evolving needs of persons who need them. Engaging users in the design, delivery, and evaluation of services ensures that these systems remain person-centered, responsive, and relevant. By incorporating feedback from users and their families, service providers can more accurately tailor interventions to individual needs, thereby enhancing the impact and satisfaction with the services provided. A rights-based approach, views users not just as passive recipients but as active participants who should have a say in shaping the services that affect their lives. This approach aligns with principles established by the European Social Charter and the Charter of Fundamental Rights,³⁰ which advocate for individuals' rights to autonomy, dignity, and empowerment within social service systems.

30 [European Social Charter](#)

User involvement brings the perspectives of those directly impacted by services to the forefront, facilitating a more nuanced understanding of what quality means in practical terms. It enables social service providers to adjust to the unique needs and expectations of each user, ensuring that services are respectful of personal values, cultural backgrounds, and individual goals. For example, allowing users the freedom to choose their providers or customise service options based on personal needs promotes a sense of control and agency, which are essential to user satisfaction and empowerment. However, meaningful choice and autonomy require that users are well-informed about service options and quality standards, making transparency in service criteria and outcomes crucial. When quality indicators are clearly communicated, users can make educated choices and actively engage in the process, which in turn drives service providers to uphold high standards.

Moreover, incorporating user involvement can create a feedback loop that enhances service quality over time. By giving users a platform to voice their experiences and preferences, social service providers gain insights that help in refining programmes, identifying areas for improvement, and innovating new approaches to meet changing demands. For this participatory model to work effectively, social services must establish flexible and accessible channels for communication, ensuring that users from all backgrounds feel heard and valued.

A QUALIFIED WORKFORCE

In addition to user involvement, a qualified workforce is essential for delivering effective, compassionate, and timely social services, particularly in sectors like healthcare, elderly care, disability support, and mental health services. Skilled professionals bring the knowledge, empathy, and expertise needed to address complex social and health-related issues, making them indispensable to the quality and reliability of care. In Europe, where the demand for social services is rising due to aging populations, immigration, and increasing mental health concerns, a well-trained workforce helps maintain high standards of service and ensures continuity in care delivery. Another important element in ensuring quality is maintaining an adequate patient-to-carer ratio, which allows social service providers to deliver personalised and attentive care. An appropriate ratio minimises staff burnout, enhances job satisfaction, and reduce the likelihood of errors or neglect, creating a safer and more supportive environment for users. In healthcare settings, for example, lower patient-to-carer ratios enable carers to monitor patients closely, respond promptly to their needs, and spend more time on comprehensive, individualised care plans. In elderly care, having a sufficient number of caregivers per resident ensures that each individual receives attentive daily assistance, significantly improving their quality of life. Prioritising the right balance between patients and carers not only supports the welfare of service users but also leads to more sustainable working conditions, ultimately making careers in social services more attractive and retaining qualified workforce in the long term.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO MEMBER STATES AND THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

- **Prioritize Sustainable Investment in Quality Social Services:** The European Commission should encourage Member States to secure sustainable funding for social services, emphasizing that quality standards are essential for long-term social and economic benefits. Investment should focus not only on accessibility and affordability but also on supporting training, fair wages, and career development for social service staff. This approach will strengthen the workforce, reduce turnover, and ensure that services meet high standards consistently.

- Promote User-Centered, Participatory Service Models: The Commission should advocate for a user-centered approach that actively involves service users in the design, evaluation, and improvement of social services. By facilitating feedback mechanisms and transparency in quality indicators, users can make informed choices and drive service improvements. This participatory model will enhance the relevance, adaptability, and inclusiveness of social services across Europe.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION AND TO MEMBER STATES

To address the critical challenges facing social services across Europe, and create a favourable ecosystem for the provision of social services, Eurodiaconia makes the following recommendations to the European Commission together with national governments. The following decisive steps are needed to support and strengthen this sector. Given the increased demand for social services amid demographic changes, economic pressures, and the push for a green and digital transition, targeted social investments are essential, we need clear legal frameworks, support for social innovation and digitalisation.

1. Social Investment

- **Incorporate Targets:** The EU should integrate social investment targets into the European Semester process, urging Member States to prioritize social spending in their national budgets and align policies with social objectives.
- **National Social Investment Plans:** Member States are encouraged to create national social investment plans that detail strategies for financing social services and ensuring long-term sustainability.
- **Stable Financing Commitment:** Member States must commit to long-term, stable financing for social services, moving away from short-term, project-based funding that disrupts service continuity.

2. Digitalisation and Innovation in Social Services

- **Integration of Digital Tools:** Member States should adequately fund social services to support them in adopting digital tools and innovative technologies in service delivery by:
- Promoting digital platforms for easier access to social services, especially in remote areas.
- Investing in technology for home-based care, such as telehealth services and digital monitoring systems as assisting technologies, ensuring human interaction remains the number one priority
- Supporting innovation through EU research and development funding aimed at cost-effective solutions for social service challenges.

3. Reform Public Procurement Rules

- **Simplification and Standardization:** Streamline procurement procedures across the EU to reduce administrative burdens:
- Create a unified digital platform for public procurement processes.
- Incorporate social criteria into procurement processes to emphasize quality and social value alongside price.
- Invest in training for procurement officials on managing complex processes and integrating social criteria effectively.

4. Improving State Aid Regulations

- **Clarify SGEI Definition:** The European Commission should provide guidance to ensure essential social services qualify as Services of General Economic Interest (SGEI):
- Expand the SGEI definition to encompass a wider range of social services.

- Simplify the classification process for Member States to facilitate access to state aid.
- Allow flexibility in applying state aid rules for sustainable public funding, especially in deprived regions.

5. Secure Sustainable Financing

- Expand EU Funding: Increase funding allocations through instruments like the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), and Social Climate Fund:
 - Make ESF+ more flexible for long-term investments in social infrastructure.
 - Introduce new funding programs aimed at modernizing service infrastructure beyond RRF deadlines.
- Establish National Funding Strategies: Require Member States to develop national strategies ensuring stable financing for social services:
 - Focus investments on regions with high poverty levels, social exclusion, and aging populations.
 - Encourage co-financing models involving national governments, EU institutions, and private sector actors.

6. Support Service Quality Across Member States

- Encourage implementation of the Voluntary European Quality Framework for Social Services.
- Support social services and public authorities to develop indicators for measuring service affordability and accessibility