

BRIEFING FOR MEMBERS

The EU Care Strategy – strengthening gender equality and social fairness

Why a European Care Strategy?

In September 2022, the European Commission published for the first time an EU vision on Care- the European Care Strategy with the aim to ensure quality, affordable and accessible care services across the European Union and to improve the condition for both care receivers and the people they care for both professionally and informally. The strategy is accompanied by two Council Recommendations for Member States: [on the revision of the Barcelona targets on early childhood education and care](#) and [on access to affordable and high-quality long-term care](#). Both recommendations are a political communications but are not legally binding.

In March 2021, the European Commission had adopted the Action Plan for the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) which is a building block following the declaration of the pillar and outlines concrete actions the European Commission plans to carry out to benefit the citizens and support well-functioning and fair labour markets and welfare systems. Long-term care services organised by public authorities, at national, regional, or local levels, are primarily considered social services of general interest as they have a clear social function.

Principle 18 of the EPSR (European Pillar of Social Rights) which covers the topic of long-term care, states that everyone has the right to affordable long-term care services of good quality, in particular home care and community-based services. This action focuses on setting a framework for policy reforms to guide the development of sustainable long-term care that ensures better access to quality services for those in need and encourages Member States to invest in the health and care workforce, improving their working conditions and access to training.

Principle 11 of the EPSR gives the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality to children, as well as the right to protection from poverty, in line with the [European Child Guarantee](#).

Following this, the **EU Care Strategy** was announced as part of the commitments of the Action Plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

1. [The revision of the Barcelona Targets on early childhood education and care](#)

This Recommendation on the revision of the Barcelona Targets on early childhood education and care aims to encourage Member States to increase participation in early childhood

education and care (ECEC) in order to facilitate women's labour-market participation and enhance the social and cognitive development of children, in particular for those in vulnerable situations or from disadvantaged backgrounds.¹ In order to remove disincentives for female labour-market participation, the European Council set in 2002 the so called 'Barcelona targets' on childcare, consisting of two targets: a participation rate in early childhood education and care of 33% of children under 3 years of age and of 90% for children from age 3 until mandatory school age.

Ten years later, following the original 'Barcelona targets,' the new Recommendation commends Member States to revise the original targets. Concretely, the original target for participation in the ECEC for children under 3 years old should go from 33% to 45%, with dynamic targets for specific countries that have not yet reached the original 2002 targets. The agreed text thus recommends these Member States to increase ECEC participation in relation to their respective current participation rates:

- By at least 90% for Member States whose participation rate is lower than 20%
- By at least 45%, or until at least reaching a participation rate of 45%, for Member States whose participation rate is between 20% and 33%

For the participation on ECEC for children from age 3 until mandatory school age, the target goes up from 90% to 96%.

While recognising the utility of implementing a targeted approach to support countries with lower rates to set achievable goals, this is also likely to further perpetuate inequalities between EU states and regions.

Conversely, the Recommendation includes many positive elements such as a strong focus on the quality, accessibility and affordability of the services provided, the recognition of the barriers that prevent participation, and the need to provide concrete support for formal and informal carers.

Equally, it introduces a focus on children from disadvantaged groups and at risk of poverty or social exclusion and importantly highlights the relevance of an inclusive, high-quality, non-segregated ECEC and out-of-school care, that is affordable and accessible for everyone,

¹ Proposal for a Council Recommendation on the Revision of the Barcelona Targets on early childhood education and care, COM (2022) 442 final 2022/0263 (NLE).

particularly for children with disabilities, with a migrant background, and from Roma communities.

Notably, the Recommendation calls on Member States to ensure that, for children not covered by the Child Guarantee, the net cost of ECEC is proportionate to other household expenses and disposable income, paying particular attention to low-income households.

Further recommendations from the Commission to Member States included the assurance of availability of childcare services in urban as well as rural and disadvantaged areas and the introduction of a legal entitlement to ECEC.

Finally, Member States are recommended to tackle the persisting gender care gap, in particular by encouraging uptake by fathers of paternity leave, parental leave, and flexible working-time arrangements, combined with more equal sharing of care responsibilities within couples as regards paid and unpaid work.

2. [Access to affordable high-quality long-term care](#)

The second Council Recommendation as part of the EU Care Strategy focuses on the access to affordable high-quality long-term care.

The provision of care is organised differently among Member States as conditions vary in each country (private and public settings, rural and urban areas, different age groups, different labour market situations...). However, there are many similarities too, particularly when it comes to common challenges. Changing demographic patterns and ageing societies lead to challenging situations in the healthcare sector, primarily staff shortages and rising costs. A lot of families cannot afford the health care needed and the care work is done by relatives, friends, or neighbours.

As the competence and legal responsibility for social policies lies within the Member States, the Commission recommends that Member States draw up national action plans to make care in the EU more available, accessible and of better quality and announcing a national long-term care coordinator, supporting the implementation of this Recommendation at national level.

Consequently, the implementation of adequate reforms of health and care systems are to be done at the national level. However, the EU Care Strategy can contribute to national efforts and establish an ambitious framework in which national approaches can be set. The Council Recommendation on access to affordable high-quality long-term care encourages Member

States to invest in the health and care workforce, improving working conditions and access to training, building on the European Pillar of Social Rights action plan.

Against this background, the Commission makes the following Recommendations to Member States:

- It is recommended that Member States ensure the adequacy of social protection for long-term care, in particular by ensuring that all people with long-term care needs have access to long-term care
- It is recommended that Member States continuously align the offer of long-term care services to long-term care needs, while providing a balanced mix of long-term care options and care settings to cater for different long-term care needs and supporting the freedom of choice, and participation in decision-making, of people in need of care
- It is recommended that Member States ensure that high-quality criteria and standards are established for all long-term care settings, tailored to their characteristics and to apply them to all long-term care providers irrespective of their legal status. To that effect, Member States are invited to ensure a national quality framework for long-term care in accordance with the quality principles set out in the Annex and to include in it an appropriate quality assurance mechanism
- It is recommended that Member States support quality employment and fair working conditions in long-term care
- It is recommended that Member States, in collaboration, where relevant, with social partners, long-term care providers and other stakeholders, improve the professionalisation of care and address skills needs and worker shortages in long-term care
- It is recommended that Member States ensure sound policy governance in long-term care, including an effective coordination mechanism to design, deploy and monitor policy actions and investments in that area, in particular by having in place a long-term care coordinator or another appropriate coordination mechanism, in accordance with national circumstances, supporting the implementation of this Recommendation at national level
- It is recommended that Member States communicate to the Commission, within 18 months from the adoption of this Recommendation, the set of measures taken or planned to implement it, building where relevant on existing national strategies or plans and taking into account national, regional, and local circumstances. Where

appropriate, subsequent progress reports should be based on relevant reporting mechanisms and fora, including those under the Social Open Method of Coordination, the European Semester and other relevant Union programming and reporting mechanisms, such as the national recovery plans

Finally, the ratification and implementation of the [ILO \(International Labour Organisation\) Convention 189](#) on domestic workers in each Member State shall give the right to a safe and healthy working environment for domestic work.

Both Council Recommendations for Member States, on early childhood education and care, and on access to affordable high-quality long-term care, were adopted by the Council of the European Union on 8 December 2022 as part of the EU Care Strategy.

Eurodiaconia's Assessment:

Eurodiaconia welcomes the recommendation and notes that it addresses the main challenges in the care sector such as availability, affordability, accessibility, quality, workforce, funding, and governance challenges. The Recommendations point in the right direction for the actions needed.

Whilst the initiative is mostly positive, we regret to see that there is no real recognition of the not-for-profit care providers. Across the Member States, non-profit organisations play crucial roles in providing care services to persons in need. There is a great need for policymakers to recognise the position as well as the contribution of non-profit organisations in terms of service delivery, civic participation, and social innovation. Therefore, we would like to see the approved national long-term care coordinators collaborate closely with not-for-profit organisations to facilitate mutual learning, share experiences and jointly set up measures to implement the recommendations.

Also, we regret that there is no tailored funding mapped out for the implementation of these recommendations given that financing is a huge challenge in long-term care.

What comes next?

While the EU Care Strategy holds a lot of potential, the EU does not have the legislative power in this domain, thus there is no mandatory action for Member States. The Commission therefore proposes some tools to encourage action by Member States, such as the nomination

of a national long-term care coordinator and the presentation of national actions plans on long-term care within one year, hence until December this year.

The Commission on its part has committed to undertake [actions](#) including the creation of a new sectoral social dialogue for social services at the EU level, promoting the establishment of a skills partnerships under the Pact for Skills for the long-term care sector, fund projects and research to assess the social and economic value of work and working conditions in the care sector, amongst more measures.

For each recommendation, the Commission will publish an in-depth report within five years to give an overview of the state of play in implementation. Member States should inform the Commission on measures to implement the recommendations on the national level while the Commission will continue monitoring policy developments during the [European Semester](#) and supporting funding reforms and investment through available EU funding.

What you can do at the national level:

- The Commission has published a list of national long-term care coordinators, nominated by each Member State, and equipped with adequate resources and mandate to facilitate mutual learning, share experiences, and follow up on actions taken in response to this Recommendation; get in touch with your national coordinator.
- Through your national coordinator, follow up on measures put together by your Member State to implement this recommendation. You can find a list of national coordinators [here](#).
- Monitor the implementation level through the European semester process especially the Country report and the country specific recommendations.
- Keep us updated on how the recommendation is being implemented in your country.
- Eurodiaconia will continue to engage on the topic through the High-level Expert Group on Social Services.