

Short Briefing on the EU Care Strategy 2022: One year after the adoption

The European Care Strategy was launched by the European Commission in 2022. It is the first Strategy developed by the EU on the topic of care and it aims to strengthen the resilience of European care systems and improve the conditions of care givers and care receivers. Key areas of action include working conditions and work-life balance, quality and accessible services, upskilling and reskilling and gender equality.

The Strategy is closely linked with the two proposals for a Council recommendation on the revision of the Barcelona targets on early childhood education and care, and on access to affordable high-quality long-term care, adopted by the Council on 8 December 2022.

This briefing outlines the most relevant initiatives of the Strategy for organisations and associations working with persons with disabilities and on long-term care and the actions taken.

EPR as an umbrella organisation that brings together service providers for the persons with disabilities monitors the development of these initiatives and keeps members updated and engaged on them.

Care is still a pressing issue

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the migration crisis as result of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has brought a strong negative impact on the European care systems. It exposed and worsened the structural weaknesses of care systems, highlighting the need to strengthen them and make them more resilient.

Nevertheless, a series of mutual learning events among national coordinators and experts

focused on quality for long-term care, one of the key aspects of the Council Recommendation on long-term care took place.

Furthermore, a new European social dialogue committee for social services was established, bringing together employers and trade unions of the sector.

The increasing demand for care is stressing the need for active ageing policies that better integrate older people in the society. At the same time, there is a chronic lack of workforce which makes it increasingly difficult to meet such demand. Poor working conditions, low wages and the pressures caused by the pandemic are the main reasons why many care workers are leaving their jobs.

A key challenge specific to the care sector remains the gender issue (see box 1), as women make up the majority of professionals engaged in homecare that often prevents them from participating in the labour market.

All these challenges call for a re-resourcing and re-planning of the European care systems. Despite the great diversity of contexts in Europe, long-term care is a pressing fiscal and policy issue for many national governments, which risks becoming financially unsustainable due to the shrinking labour force in the face of higher demand for care workers.

The policy framework

The European Care Strategy is linked to broader European and international policy frameworks. At European level, the Strategy strongly supports the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the key policy framework for employment and social policies in Europe. In particular, it contributes to Principle 9 on the right of parents and people with caring responsibilities



to work-life balance; Principle 11 on children's right to affordable early childhood education and care; and Principle 18 on the right to access quality and affordable long-term care, especially community-based services and homecare¹.

The Care Strategy also complements other European strategies. On the topic of childhood, it creates together with the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and EU Child Guarantee a comprehensive framework for the protection of children's rights. By focusing on improving accessibility of services and shifting from institutionalised care to community-based care, the Strategy also supports the implementation of the EU Disability Strategy and the broader international framework set by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Moreover, it supports the achievement of fair and inclusive green and digital transitions, which are set to make the Union more sustainable, resilient, prosperous and fair for all.

1. The gender issue in care

According to the statistics provided by the Strategy, 90% of the care workforce consists of women. Many of them are domestic workers with precarious jobs and very low wages. Inadequate care services have a greater impact on women as they still bear most of the informal care responsibilities. This affects their work-life balance and limits their options to be in the labour market. In fact, 7.7 million women in Europe do not participate in the labour market due to unpaid care responsibilities compared to 450.000 men². This widens the gender employment gap, as well as the pay gap and pension gap between men and women.

The Strategy aims to address this issue by combating stereotypes, introducing measures for better working conditions and work-life balance in the care sector to attract more workforce. A useful instrument already available is the Work-life Balance Directive³, which for instance introduces rights to family leave and

¹ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en

more flexible working arrangements for parents and carers in order to promote equal sharing of responsibilities.

An integrated approach to care

The Strategy takes an integrated and holistic approach to care, addressing the needs of the whole population from childhood to older age. Care is seen as a continuum where different types of services follow an individual through time and adapt to meet their changing needs. The effective integration of services, ranging from healthcare to informal care, community-based care or residential care, can have a positive impact on healthcare costs and alleviate the burden on healthcare facilities.

Quality of care services

The Strategy reflects core EU concepts such as human rights, the right to good quality care for all, independent living and person-centred services. It highlights that high-quality care benefits everyone. Early childhood education facilitates employment opportunities in adulthood, contributing to reducing inequalities and the risks of poverty. Quality person-centred long-term care instead enables older people to keep their autonomy and live in dignity, while supporting the transition from institutional care to homecare and community-based settings.

Ensuring quality services all across the EU is the key overall objective of the Strategy. Significant efforts must be made, since such services remain out of reach for many people, including persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups. The Strategy stresses the need for high-quality standards applicable to both public and private service providers, including quality assurance, enforcement and monitoring mechanisms.

Affordability and accessibility

Lack of affordability is a major challenge both in childhood education and long-term care and

² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52022DC0440>

³ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32019L1158>



leads to unfair access to care. In a similar way, lack of accessibility means that people in need of care are not provided with the right means to benefit from the services available. This is particularly relevant for persons with disabilities, who often face physical barriers when accessing care services, but it can affect also people living in rural and remote areas.

Council Recommendation on early childhood care

As a process of the Barcelona targets revision that were introduced in 2002 with a purpose to encourage Member States to increase participation in early childhood education and care 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, the Council introduced a Recommendation on early childhood care.

The Recommendation focuses on early childhood education and care and encourages Member States to increase participation in these services. It recommends that:

- at least 45% of children below the age of three participate in early childhood education and care (specific targets apply to member states that have yet to reach the 2002 goals);
- at least 96% of children between the age of three and the starting age for compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education and care⁴.

The recommendation also covers qualitative aspects such as staff-child ratios and group sizes and the territorial distribution of care facilities.

⁴ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/12/08/eu-ministers-adopt-recommendations-on-early-childhood-and-long-term-care/>

Council Recommendation on high-quality long-term care

The Council Recommendation on affordable high-quality long-term care was adopted by the Council on 8 December 2022.

The Recommendation invites Member States to take action to improve access to affordable, high-quality long-term care for all people who need it and addresses the adequacy of social protection for long-term care, the availability and quality of long-term care services, the challenges faced by formal and informal carers as well as long-term care governance.

The long-term care recommendation proposes actions to make care more accessible, affordable and of better quality. It recommends – among other things – closing the territorial gaps in availability of and access to long-term care, in particular in rural and depopulating areas, ensuring compliance with quality criteria and standards across all long-term care settings and promoting autonomy and independent living.

The recommendation also calls on Member States to provide more upskilling and reskilling opportunities to care workers and take action to improve their working conditions, including informal carers as well as to have in place a long-term care coordinator or another appropriate coordination mechanism supporting the implementation of the Recommendation at national level⁵.

Better working conditions for care workers

The Strategy highlights the need to make the care sector more attractive, especially by improving working conditions and wages and providing education and training. Poor working conditions of care workers are one of the major challenges, as they hamper retention and recruitment of much needed staff. The situation has worsened due to the pandemic, but it is particularly bad for domestic workers, who sometimes work undeclared and are denied

⁵ <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=792>



basic labour rights. On this point, the Strategy invites Member States to ratify and comply with the ILO Convention 189⁶, which sets out standards for decent working conditions for domestic workers. At the moment, only 9 Member States have ratified the Convention (where for Spain, for instance, it will enter into force on 29 Feb 2024)⁷.

Upskilling and reskilling

While the care staff shortages are continuing to be a pending issue, the Strategy aims to support not only recruitment of new professionals, but also the retention of those already in the sector through upskilling and reskilling. Opportunities in initial education and in professional development need to be provided to all kinds of staff and include digital skills.

The European Commission is working closely with Cedefop, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training⁸ with the aim of estimating the current and future trends and skills needed in order to deliver up-to-date trainings.

Within the framework of the European Pact for Skills that aims to support public and private organisations with upskilling and reskilling, so they can thrive through the green and digital transitions, it also promotes the creation of a skills partnership for the long-term care sector. Furthermore, EU funding programmes like Erasmus+ and the Digital programme are used to provide specific training opportunities for health and care workers on digital skills.

2. Informal care

The Strategy points out that 52 million people provide informal long-term care to family members or friends in the EU, making up 80% of total long-term care providers⁹. The pandemic caused a disruption in community-based services provision, increasing the demand for homecare. Due to a lack of capacity and

resources, this led to a surge of family caring and increased gender inequality.

The Strategy recognises that informal carers are subject to negative effects of care provision in terms of mental health and income. It stresses the need to invest more in the sector to ensure that people with caring responsibilities have a better work-life balance and can carry on with their professional lives, and that informal care becomes “a choice rather than a necessity”¹⁰. Member States are invited to work on policies formalising informal care and on support measures such as counselling, psychological support and respite care, as well as more training opportunities for informal carers.

The digital transition

The Strategy places a great focus on the relevance of the digital transition in long-term care systems. It stresses that access to innovative digital tools such as assistive technologies, artificial intelligence, robotics and telemedicine can improve both the quality of care and the working conditions of care workers.

However, in order to fully exploit the potential of technology, it is essential that carers can access training on digital skills and that these tools are affordable and accessible to everyone, including persons with disabilities or living in remote areas. Supporting the exchange of good practices is also key to promote the uptake of innovative technology. For this reason, the Commission will finance a knowledge hub for innovative digital solutions in health and care services and increase funding opportunities to encourage Member States to mainstream digital solutions in the design and implementation of care policies.

Sustainability of the care sector

Long-term care is a pressing fiscal issue for many Member States. Public expenditure for

⁶ https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/publication/wcms_168266.pdf

⁷ https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEX_PUB:11300:0::NO::P11300_INSTRUMENT_ID:2551460

⁸ <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en>

⁹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52022DC0440>

¹⁰ Ibid.



long-term care is expected to rise to 2.5% of GDP by 2050¹¹, but there are strong differences among countries. The Strategy points out that sustainable financing of the care sector needs to be improved through the development of an integrated governance framework, monitoring and well-targeted resources that can improve cost-effectiveness.

For this purpose, the Member States can access a range of EU funds, such as the European Social Fund Plus, the European Regional Development Fund, the Just Transition Fund, Horizon Europe and the Digital programme. The Recovery and Resilience Facility is another essential instrument used by many national governments to strengthen the long-term care sector.

For more information

Consult the official document of the EU Disability Strategy on the European Commission's website [here](#).



**Co-funded by
the European Union**

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Commission. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

¹¹ Ibid.

