

14th May 2020

REF: Open Letter in Follow-up to High Level Discussion on COVID-19 and Social Services

Dear Vice Presidents Dubravka Šuica and Věra Jourová
Dear Commissioners Nicolas Schmit, Helena Dalli and Stella Kyriakides

We thank you for the positive high-level discussion on the impact of the Covid-19 public health emergency on social services, which took place with you on the 22nd April 2020. We take the liberty of addressing some follow-up points in view of translating the positive exchange into delivering concrete outcomes for the millions of people using and providing social services across Europe.

We request the European Commission to take urgent steps to promote access to social services for the millions of people with support needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Among several suggestions, we propose the creation of an Emergency Fund for Social Services and that the European Recovery Plan is committed to supporting the most vulnerable in our societies. We came to this conclusion given that existing European measures are useful for the general population, yet they are not sufficiently reaching social services and those most at risk in this time of crisis.

In our exchange, we highlighted the major impact of the crisis on the provision of social services for older persons, persons with disabilities, homeless persons, persons in or at risk of poverty, those with abusive partners or family members, vulnerable children and young people, refugees and asylum seekers, as well as people with addictions. The Social Services sector represents over 200,000 not-for-profit, public and private organisations across Europe, employing [11 million professionals in Europe \(close to 5% of total EU workforce\)](#) and millions of volunteers. Social services enable millions of people in Europe and their families to have access to their human rights and to participate actively in society, including in employment, as highlighted by the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Social Service provision has been and continues to be significantly affected by COVID-19. First of all, [recent data](#) is showing that a significant proportion of COVID-19 deaths concern people living in residential social services facilities, in particular care homes for the elderly. Verified infection rates in social services also appear to be worryingly high.

Despite recent progress, millions of older persons, persons with disabilities, homeless people and others continue to be at very high risk of infection given the lack of political attention to people living in residential care facilities and the professionals supporting them. This is illustrated by the fact that -in many countries- both have not been considered a priority for personal protective equipment and testing.

This tragedy is only part of the story, with millions of people and their families unable to access the non-residential care and support services they usually benefit from. [10,000s of essential face-to-face services](#) such as homecare, day, respite and emergency support services have had to close or shift online, in large part due to a lack of political support for these essential social services before and during this crisis. Despite the remarkable shift of support provided now through online tools, the remaining unmet social service provision is hugely damaging to the lives of millions of people and their family care-givers, as well as to the continuity of social service providers and the 11 million jobs that come with it.

It is also increasingly clear that the social impact of this crisis will last longer than the health crisis itself and that the existence of many of these services and their jobs are threatened by economic difficulties. This will weaken the capacity of Europe to face the social challenges linked to the COVID-19 but also to pre-existing challenges such as demographic change and the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

This being said, several key measures can be taken to ensure that the detrimental social impact of this crisis is limited in time. The starting point is to consider social services - in their full diversity - as essential, on equal terms to other Services of General Interest such as our healthcare systems. This means ensuring that the specific needs of social services and the people who benefit from them are fully prioritized in the current response, follow-up, economic recovery and long-term measures.

As a consequence, this means that pro-active steps are taken to

- (1) Prioritise access to protective equipment, testing and vaccines in social services;
- (2) Guarantee the continuity of service provision through adequate funding and staffing; and
- (3) Provide concrete advice -through Roadmaps and Guidance- to national authorities to ensure that the role and needs of social services, their professionals and people who use such services are fully considered in the crisis response, transition, recovery and follow-up measures taken by Public Authorities.

European action is needed to coordinate and support national, regional and local measures; yet also to lead by example. As such, we welcome the [European initiatives](#) taken to date, in support of public health, businesses and jobs.

Yet, as for two weeks ago, there is little evidence of existing EU measures benefitting social services on the ground.

Feedback from local stakeholders informs us that :

- [Despite your efforts](#), the [Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative](#) (CRII and CRII+) is not yet reaching the social services sector.
- The [European Union Emergency Support Instrument for the healthcare sector](#) is built to target the immediate needs of the equally strained hospital and medical care system. It is not currently aimed towards supporting social service provision.
- The [Joint European Roadmap towards lifting COVID-19 containment measures](#) states that “most vulnerable groups should be protected for longer”; but does not provide elements as to how that can be done in practice, whilst also respecting the individual human rights of members of these vulnerable groups and recognizing the impact of such “protection” on the people themselves, their caregivers and the professionals supporting them.
- The [European Agency for Safety and Health at Work’s COVID-19 Back to the Workplace Guidance](#) is a useful contribution, but not necessarily targeted to the unique nature of much of social care work; which requires – almost by definition- close contact with people benefitting from such services.

In short, there is little evidence of European initiatives helping social services to provide quality care and support to millions of people across the continent during the COVID-19 pandemic (beyond pre-existing measures, for instance: the European Social Fund which has supported quality social services for years).

The European Parliament has called on the Commission and Member States to [prioritise aid and crisis-mitigation measures for the most vulnerable citizens](#). Our view is that the current measures – whilst positive for the general public – are not reaching the social care and support needs of vulnerable citizens.

As such, we request you to develop a three step approach for a targeted European response to the social services crisis across Europe:

- In the short term, the European Commission should immediately create an Emergency Fund for Social Services to provide rapid access to much needed funding (meeting additional costs, buying protective equipment, ensuring a human-rights based response to confinement, etc) for the immediate crisis needs at local level. This could be done on a similar basis to the Emergency Fund for the Healthcare sector.
- In the medium-term, the European Commission should ensure that social services, their professionals and the millions who use them become the heart of the European Response. To achieve this, the European Commission needs to
 - Ensure that the European Recovery Plan dedicates measures to supporting the most vulnerable and those who care and support them, including through specific budget allocations to quality social service provision.
 - Guarantee an increase in the next multi-annual financial framework allocation to ensure access to quality social services, in line with the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights; notably by re-enforcing the European Social Fund and developing guidelines to ensure funds are used to support quality social service provision.
 - set-up a Helpdesk for social service providers to access and benefit from the CRII in the months to come.
 - provide Guidance to Member States regarding how to ensure the rights of vulnerable groups are respected, including through quality social service provision, during the next phases of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic (lifting of confinement, economy recovery).
- In the long-term, the European Commission should consider a European Communication on Social Services, defining the different European support measures towards the recovery of social services following the COVID-19 crisis and in support of the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

These three steps will go a long way to show that the European Union acknowledges the social services crisis for millions of people in Europe and aims to strengthen the response by leading by example, supporting Member State action and also protecting and empowering those most at risk during the COVID-19 pandemic and after.

As the European representatives of social services organisations and social partner organisations in social services, we hope that you to make quick progress on these three points and look forward to helping you in that process as part of a newly created European Taskforce on Quality Social Services during COVID-19, alongside representatives of those using such services, especially the European Disability Forum and AGE Platform.

We are available to discuss these points in more detail

Yours sincerely

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