

FRAMEWORK OF ACTIONS ON

RETENTION AND

RECRUITMENT

IN SOCIAL

SERVICES

2025



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BACKGROUND

In September 2022, the European Commission presented its European Care Strategy, an implementation tool of the European Pillar of Social Rights. The strategy comprises proposals for Council recommendations on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and Long-Term Care (LTC).

The Care Strategy calls for action to improve working conditions in the social services sector¹ in order to retain and attract workers with the right skills and meet the growing demand for care. It recommends that Member States promote collective bargaining and social dialogue in the sector, and to ensure the highest standards of occupational health and safety for the care workforce.

More than 1.6 million long-term care workers need to be added by 2050 to keep care coverage at least at the current level.² Despite the growing demand, social services face major difficulties in recruiting and retaining enough workers - nearly all EU countries currently report staff shortages, and turnover rates are high.

On 20 March 2024, the European Commission presented an Action Plan³ to tackle labour and skills shortages and proposed to work together with Member States and social partners to address these issues over the coming months and years. The Social Employers and EPSU contributed to this Action Plan⁴.

In this context, the Social Employers and EPSU jointly address retention and recruitment and adopt this Framework of Actions.

The main objectives of this Framework of Actions are:

- to lay out actions the Social Employers and EPSU are committed to implement,
- to propose actions to the national and local social partners, enabling them to take initiatives tailored to their specific environments and current existing regulations,
- to improve retention and recruitment in social services.

To implement this Framework of Actions, the Social Employers and EPSU will work with and encourage national, regional, and local stakeholders to take action in developing and implementing the policies specified in this Framework concerning the social services workforce. In areas requiring public intervention, they provide policy recommendations to public authorities.

Indeed, public authorities play a vital role in setting regulatory frameworks, funding safe staffing levels and decent wages, supporting education and training schemes, and providing resources to improve working conditions in the sector.

¹ “Social services” refers to the activities included in NACE codes 87 and 88 (Residential care and Social Services without accommodation), which primarily cover care services for older persons, persons with disabilities, children and other vulnerable persons.

² European Commission, [Communication on the European Care Strategy](#), 2022.

³ European Commission, [Communication on the Action Plan to tackle Labour and Skills Shortages](#), 2024.

⁴ Social Employers and EPSU, [Joint Contribution to the Action Plan on Labour and Skills Shortages](#), 2024.

1. Education and initial training

It is crucial to develop accessible, quality education and initial training in the field of care work to ensure that there are enough skilled professionals capable of providing high-quality care to an increasingly ageing population. All care workers face new support demands from increasingly diverse groups with progressively complex needs, as well as the growing use of technologies. For example, long-term care workers need to be supported to adapt to the shift towards more individualised homecare and community-based services. Investing in education and initial training enhances the employability and job security of the employee.

Action 1: To ensure access to quality education and training, the Social Employers and EPSU encourage their members to advocate for and get involved in the assessment, creation and development of education and initial training with training providers to best align with current and future needs on the ground. This needs assessment involves a multistakeholder approach and can include the participation of service users, their representatives, and family carers. This includes employers taking a proactive role in offering work placements for students and trainees.

The Social Employers and EPSU call on Member States to take action or contribute to the development of education and training programmes for care staff.

2. Welcoming staff

Social services frequently experience high turnover rates, with many workers resigning within their first days or months, often leaving the sector entirely even after investing years in their education.

According to framework [Directive 1989/391 on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers at work](#), “the employer shall ensure that each worker receives adequate safety and health training, in particular in the form of information and instructions specific to his workstation or job”, provided upon recruitment.

Action 2: The Social Employers and EPSU recommend that their members collaborate to enhance the welcoming process for new workers. They are committed to recommend that all new staff

are provided with supervised, practical on-the-job information and instructions and/or training during their integration process. This should be tailored to the tasks the person will perform, based on their experience and employment contract, to ensure the safety of both the worker and the service users.

2.1 Clear description of functions

The Social Employers and EPSU remind and call on their members to ensure the enforcement of [Directive 2019/1152 on Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions](#), which establishes extensive and updated rights for all workers in the EU. The Directive particularly addresses the insufficient protection for workers in more precarious jobs, while limiting the burden on employers and maintaining flexibility to adapt to a changing labour market.

The Social Employers and EPSU consider written information about job functions to be carried out as particularly important for workforce retention and recruitment. Therefore, they are committed to ensuring workers are informed in writing of the title, grade, nature or category of work, along with a brief written specification or description of the work for which the worker is employed.

2.2 Mentoring for better integration

The Social Employers and EPSU acknowledge that it is relevant to develop mentorship programmes, particularly for newcomers and workers without prior experience in their field of employment. Valuing and retaining experienced workers’ skills and expertise by coaching and mentoring less experienced staff to transfer knowledge can also help to create an atmosphere of inclusiveness and recognition.

It is worth noting that a mentorship system benefits not only the mentee, but also the mentor. Such systems acknowledge the mentors’ expertise and ability to transfer knowledge and practices. Thanks to the close relationship between the mentor and the mentee, the mentor can also detect and warn of potential problems.

Action 3: To develop mentorship, employers acknowledge that mentors should be properly trained, duly recognised for this task and given sufficient time to carry out their mentoring responsibilities under optimal conditions.

3. Safe staffing levels

Successful workplace integration depends on having safe staffing levels, which have to be based on a workforce that can provide the necessary range of quality services across various shifts and work patterns.

Staffing levels not only depend on the number of employees but also in their skills sets and the organisation and planning of work. Work organisation needs to consider services users, all workers (front line, management and support) and employers' needs and preferences, including agreed hours of work, rest periods and work-life balance.

In a sector in which the wage bill makes up the bulk of the budget, it is evident that funding gives priority to the wage bill. To achieve safe staffing levels, it is paramount that funding authorities provide sufficient and sustainable funding for social services providers. This funding must be tailored to meet the specific needs and characteristics of service users.

The Social Employers and EPSU are determined to support their members in developing measures to achieve safe, tailor-made, needs-based staffing levels.

4. Valuing existing staff

All workers in the social services sector have the right to decent working conditions and to be treated equally, irrespective of their employment status.

4.1 Decent wages (in conjunction with sufficient and sustainable funding)

According to a Eurofound study⁵ based on 2018 data, the hourly wages of social services workers are 21% below the average national hourly earnings.

To gain a clear and up-to-date understanding of the wage situation, the Social Employers, CEMR and EPSU jointly requested an updated study from

Eurofound. This study, which will provide data at both EU and national levels, is expected to be published in mid-2025.

Action 4: The Social Employers and EPSU will disseminate the results of this Eurofound study and other future relevant studies and encourage their members to use the findings in discussion with their funding authorities, as an argument to increase funding for social services, improve working conditions, staffing levels and care delivery.

4.2 Support workers in their career development

The Social Employers and EPSU recognise that inclusive skills planning, career development opportunities for new job positions, new tasks and responsibilities, along with proper recognition are key for improving attractiveness and long-term retention of the workforce and for maintaining motivated teams.

Career development opportunities should reflect both the organisations' needs and workers' desires and ambitions within the organisation and can take place both at vertical and horizontal level. Staff should receive tailored support for development throughout their career, considering their individual circumstances. This support can be facilitated through human resources management, adapted career perspectives and flexible work arrangements that accommodate both service users' needs and organisational requirements.

Action 5: To support workers' career development, employers are encouraged to develop career development measures.

5. Training, life-long learning and continuous professional development

According to the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#), Article 1, "Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market".

⁵ Eurofound, Wages in long-term care and other social services 21% below average, 2021

Providing support to children, persons with disabilities, older persons and other vulnerable persons - whether in residential settings, at home or within the community - requires a multi-layered and complex variety of skills.

As care services evolve towards more person-centred services at home and in the community and with the increasing use of digital solutions and emphasis on career developments, the need to improve access to training, lifelong learning and skills becomes clear.

The Social Employers and EPSU are convinced that a regularly well-trained workforce, whatever the job position or age, will yield better quality care services. In this respect, training activities are obligations for both the employer and the employee, and knowledge and skills development are necessary across a diverse range of care settings and services.

Therefore, the Social Employers and EPSU, along with European-level social services provider organisations, national social services employers and training centres, are currently part of the large-scale skills partnership for long-term care, established within the framework of the European Commission's Pact for Skills.

While this partnership is focused on acquiring digital skills and skills needed to provide more person-centred services in long-term care, the Social Employers and EPSU agree that its principles should be extended to encompass the entire social services workforce, including for example early childhood education and care.

Action 6: The Social Employers and EPSU urge the ESF+ and ERASMUS+ programme, along with their national and local managing authorities, to issue targeted and simplified calls for projects that enable social services providers to train more care staff.

5.1 Assessing the skills needs - forecasting

Action 7: The Social Employers and EPSU call on their members to address and develop workforce planning mechanisms, tools and recommendations aiming to anticipate and meet current and future skills needs. This will ensure that a safe level of staff with the necessary skills are available in the right place and at the right time, adjusting

the skills mix to the most suitable levels, thereby contributing to the improvement of care quality and working conditions.

Worker's representatives should be consulted on the development of these mechanisms, tools and recommendations.

5.2 Developing flexible and diverse training opportunities for career progression

The Social Employers and EPSU consider ensuring career development opportunities for workers crucial for workforce retention, as they provide long-term career prospects and enhance the value of social services work.

Training and continuing professional development (CPD), where applicable, need to reflect new forms of care. This is important for adapting to changes, enhancing the quality of care and supporting career advancement. Employers should ensure that all workers, especially those with a lower level of education, have the means and opportunities to participate in training activities when they are organised.

The Social Employers and EPSU consider the development of modular and flexible training certifications, which complement existing ones, as relevant, as they allow for a targeted acquisition of skills and competences adapted to the needs, thereby improving the quality of services and supporting career progression.

Action 8: Workers should be offered a broad range of quality training opportunities, based on their needs and capacities, including on-the-job training, peer-to-peer learning, mentorship, massive open online courses (MOOCs), e-learning and other innovative training methods.

Social services workers should be encouraged to participate in training activities. It is therefore crucial that safe staffing levels and well-organised schedules are maintained during a workers' absence due to training. This ensures that care activities continue and prevents remaining workers from being overwhelmed, thereby minimising negative impacts on service users.

The Social Employers and EPSU emphasise the importance of on-the-job training, during paid working hours, at the ground level, across all occupational groups.

6. Work-life balance

Positive work-life balance plays a crucial role in improving the attractiveness of social services jobs and achieving a better gender balance.

6.1 The Work-Life-Balance Directive

The principles contained in [Directive 2019/1158 on work-life balance for parents and carers](#) have now been transposed into national laws, which must be adhered to. A positive work-life balance can enhance the quality of work, job motivation, and overall wellbeing at work. It may also reduce occupational health hazards, whether they are of physical or psychosocial nature.

The Social Employers and EPSU recommend these regulations are implemented with a proactive approach, recognising that they form part of policies aimed at addressing the challenging working conditions in the sector, particularly due to the sometimes staggered or irregular working hours.

6.2 Work-life balance and flexible time schedules

24/7 time schedules pose a challenge for staff retention and job attractiveness in social services. Organising work and schedules is often a very complex task, but it is feasible to regularly review work schedules to conciliate as much as possible the service users' care needs, organisational requirements, and the needs of workers.

The principles regarding maximum work durations and minimum rest periods - as outlined in [Directive 2003/88](#), which governs certain aspects of the organisation of working time - must be adhered to. These principles have been transposed into the legislation of all Member States.

7. Gender equality and workforce diversity

7.1 Addressing gender imbalances and promoting gender equality in all areas of work

The Social Employers and EPSU believe that achieving gender equality requires policies based on regular, objective data assessment and corrective measures to ensure and improve gender equality at work.

Many issues need to be addressed, including (but not limited to) equal access to training, career paths, management positions, and equal pay. The prevalence of part-time work, particularly among women, should also be addressed by seeking solutions to reduce involuntary part-time work. The Social Employers and EPSU underline the importance of national and local social dialogue discussions in tackling these challenges.

Action 9: The Social Employers and EPSU consider it important that employers regularly use existing information on remuneration and working conditions to identify positive measures to be taken to improve gender balance and promote gender equality.

7.2 Manage diversity to welcome mixed profiles, including migrant workers

The Social Employers and EPSU believe that managing diversity is not just about avoiding discrimination.

In a sector where service users are highly diverse, this entails reflecting said diversity within the staff who support them and reap the benefits of diversity within the teams.

Given that social services workers are on average older than the general working population⁶, addressing intergenerational dynamics and ensuring equal access to training and career advancement opportunities are also important considerations.

⁶ Eurofound (2020), [Long-term care workforce: Employment and working conditions](#), Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

Action 10: Workforce diversity should be promoted and managed by facilitating cross-border work and by providing measures such as free access to intercultural training, language courses, and, above all, comprehensive ethical human resources management.

8. Occupational Safety and Health

Statistics reveal significant rates of work accidents and occupational diseases in social services that have been increasing every year. This leads to high absenteeism due to physical and mental health issues, reduced working hours due to inability to work full-time, and career shifts towards other fields.

It is crucial to act now to reverse the trend. Given that 82% of the workforce in social services is female, the issue should be addressed from a gender perspective.

The Social Employers and EPSU recognise that Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) is an area where social partnership plays a particularly critical role. It is well-documented that the most effective policies in this field involve strong social dialogue, including through collective bargaining, as well as the consultation of workers and their representatives in prevention measures and overall workplace health and safety and wellbeing initiatives.

The Social Employers and EPSU recognise that there is an existing obligation for employers to provide healthy and safe working conditions (Framework EU Directive 89/391/EEC). They acknowledge the importance that their members are properly involved in designing effective health and safety measures at national and local level. Investments in OSH have overall positive economic and social benefits, and a healthy and safe work environment is essential for the delivery of quality of care. It also contributes to improving the recruitment and retention of care workers.

8.1 Risks assessment

The framework [Directive 1989/391 on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers at work](#) requires employers to conduct risk assessments at the workplace. The Social Employers and EPSU acknowledge that to make continuous progress in OSH management in

social services, mandatory risk assessments should be improved, should consider all kinds of risks, and should be regularly updated and followed-up more systematically by effective action plans, also regularly assessed and updated.

8.2 Preventing Musculoskeletal Disorders (MSDs)

Musculoskeletal Disorders (MSDs) in the social services sector are a significant and growing concern.

Recognising this, the Social Employers and EPSU participated in the EU-OSHA's ["Healthy Workplaces - Lighten the Load"](#) campaign 2020-2022.

Cooperation between employers and trade unions plays a vital role in preventing and managing MSDs, along with other occupational health hazards.

With the available assessment instruments, guidelines, and best practices, each organisation should be committed to tackling MSDs by developing their own tailor-made prevention and management programmes.

The topic will be addressed in the framework of a new European project by EPSU and the Social Employers. Its outcomes would feed into discussions between EU Social Partners for future European initiatives.

The Social Employers and EPSU recognise the connection between MSDs and psychosocial risks, which is why these issues are addressed together.

Action 11: In order to prevent MSDs, the Social Employers encourage their members to implement comprehensive measures, such as developing the work organisation, providing specific assistive equipment, and offering regularly available and readily accessible training to help prevent or minimise risks.

8.3 Tackling psychosocial risks (PSR)

The Social Employers and EPSU acknowledge that the current Strategic Framework on Occupational Safety and Health 2021 – 2027 calls for focusing on psychosocial risks.

Psychosocial risks affect all levels of the social care system and society at large. Psychosocial risk factors, according to European Agency for Safety and Health at Work⁷, include:

- “excessive workloads;
- conflicting demands and lack of role clarity;
- lack of involvement in making decisions that affect the worker;
- lack of influence over the way the job is done;
- poorly managed organisational change;
- job insecurity;
- ineffective communication;
- lack of support from management or colleagues;
- psychological and sexual harassment;
- and difficult customers, patients, pupils, etc”.

In addition, ‘ethical stress’, for example linked to the feeling of not being able to provide a quality service, especially because of the workload, should be considered.

Psychosocial risks affect both workers and managers (such as poor well-being and job satisfaction, lower motivation), impact the organisation (such as increased absenteeism, presenteeism, increased accident and injury rates), as well as society (such as costs and burden on individuals and society as a whole). Addressing psychosocial risks is essential to promote overall well-being and efficiency in the sector. Comprehensive risk assessment at organisational level should be the basis for regularly assessed and updated prevention plans.

8.4 Third party violence

The Social Employers and EPSU, acknowledge the negative impact of third-party violence and harassment on workers.

Action 12: The Social Employers will consider the updated Multi-sectoral European Guidelines on Third Party Violence and Harassment and discuss whether they join the initiative.

9. Managing change

The social services sector is confronted with significant changes that are strongly impacting its workforce. Current and future workers will have to adapt constantly to new ways of working. Changes may include for example:

- the way in which people are supported through quality services and a person-centred rights-based approach, whether in residential settings, in their own homes or in the community;
- the increasing use of and reliance on digital tools and Artificial Intelligence to support social services users, alongside the need for organisations and care providers to adapt to climate change and to promote more sustainable practices and have crisis management plans.

The shift towards an increased use of digital tools and artificial intelligence requires a bottom-up approach to guarantee a successful uptake, involving all stakeholders at all levels of the process.

The social services sector also needs to build resilience and preparedness for challenging situations and future crises (pandemics, climate change, migration, etc.).

These changes will inevitably have consequences for the workforce, in particular in terms of occupational safety and health and new knowledge and skills required, for example when service provision changes location (i.e.: specific risks regarding users’ home as a workplace).

Action 13: The Social Employers and EPSU recommend to their members that evolving needs, and consequently jobs, should be guided by strong, supportive and inclusive change management processes. This should include effective, comprehensive communication strategies, and the consultation of workers and their representatives in the development of structural changes.

10. Communication

Social services currently suffer from a poor reputation regarding salaries and working conditions. In order to improve the visibility and public perception of the sector, there is a need for more robust and wide-ranging communication.

⁷ <https://osha.europa.eu/en/themes/psychosocial-risks-and-mental-health>

Action 14: The Social Employers and EPSU call on their members to promote, advocate for and communicate more on the positive and essential aspects of care work. Member States and local authorities should launch campaigns in collaboration with social partners to promote care work.

Campaigns should be designed to address and mitigate the gender imbalance in the sector by highlighting the meaningful jobs in the sector and encouraging more men to participate in the provision of social services.

11. Social dialogue and collective bargaining

The establishment of a European Sectoral Social Dialogue Committee for Social Services in 2023 marked a big step forward. The creation of this Committee highlights the importance of promoting social dialogue in social services across Europe and recognises the role EU Social Partners can play in fostering social dialogue at national level.

Research consistently underscores that where social dialogue is present, working conditions are better and the quality of services provision increases. Since improving working conditions is crucial to enhance the sector's attractiveness, promoting social dialogue and collective bargaining across Europe is essential. Social partners are ideally positioned to address labour shortages. They are also the best placed to address skills gaps effectively.

It should be noted that half of the European countries currently lack sectoral social dialogue in

social services. Consequently, the Social Employers and EPSU are engaged in project activities aimed at building and strengthening the capacity of national stakeholders.

The [Directive 2022/2041 on Adequate Minimum Wages in the European Union](#) requires governments to work with trade unions and employers to develop national plans to strengthen and extend collective bargaining where national coverage is less than 80 percent of employees.

Action 15: Underlining the autonomy of the social partners, affiliates of the Social Employers and EPSU will use this opportunity to work together and with national governments to ensure social services are included in national plans aiming to strengthen and extend collective bargaining. To that end, they encourage social services providers to come together to establish employers' organisations capable of engaging in social dialogue with trade unions.

12. Implementation

The Social Employers and EPSU, along with their members, are committed to implementing this Framework of Action on Retention and Recruitment in Social Services.

To achieve this, the Social Employers and EPSU will jointly follow-up on the implementation of the Framework of Action by their members in three years and will monitor European legislation and other relevant policies that could impact retention and recruitment.

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