

Building a caring Europe – Realising the potential of the European Care deal

Joint call for a truly strategic framework

Over recent decades, rapid demographic and societal changes and stringent workforce challenges have placed care services, care workers and families under growing pressure. Today, around 45% of the EU population provides unpaid care, with one in ten people balancing multiple caregiving roles.[1] At the same time, formal care work is often undervalued, with wages in long-term care and other social services in the European Union being 21% lower than the average wage across all workers.[2]

These pressures affect the availability, affordability, quality and resilience of care. The European Union has therefore developed actions to support Member States in expanding, coordinating and strengthening their care systems.

The proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights in 2017 expressed a commitment to fair working conditions and work-life balance; affordable and high-quality childcare and support for children; the full inclusion of persons with disabilities in society; and affordable, high-quality long-term care services, including home- and community-based care.

Since then, several EU initiatives have helped bring these principles closer to reality: the Work-Life Balance Directive; the Council Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems; the European Care Strategy; the Action Plan for the Social Economy; the Adequate Minimum Wages Directive; and the European Disability and Gender Equality Strategies.

The planned European Care Deal offers an opportunity to connect and strengthen these commitments. The European Commission has confirmed its plan to introduce the European Care Deal in **2027**, creating a pivotal moment for renewed EU commitment and action.

I. The European Care Alliance

The European Care Alliance brings together civil society organisations, social economy actors, public service providers and social partners representing key stakeholders in the care economy: families and the people they care for, whether children or adults; older persons; persons with disabilities; care service providers; and care workers.

Together, we call on the European Commission to take committed action for care by adopting an ambitious, integrated and strategic European Care Deal. In this joint statement, we highlight what we believe the Care Deal should deliver, and we put forward nine proposals for flagship initiatives.

This effort should be based on the mobilisation of **EU funding and sustained national investments** that respond to the growing pressures on the care sector and recognises that the provision of care is a crucial driver of social and economic well-being. Realising the full potential of the European Care Deal requires strong financial commitments for its implementation under the future EU 7-year budget from 2028-2034.

[1] Unpaid care in the EU | Eurofound
[2] Wages in long-term care and other social services 21% below average | Eurofound

II. What the European Care Deal must deliver

Shared values and principles

- The Care Deal must be rights and equality based; promote non-discrimination, intersectionality, family diversity, diversity of care models, freedom of choice, human connection and the ethical use of AI.
- Advance fairness, shared responsibility and a strong social Europe.
- Align the Care Deal with the legal obligations arising under the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the European Social Charter, as well as with the objectives of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Introduce objectives and targets

- Set targets for care service coverage and reduction in the number of households unable to access care services because they are unaffordable.
- Track the gender care gap, unmet care needs, access to early childhood education and care (ECEC), including of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion and children with disabilities, and the number of children with disabilities cared for only by their parents.
- Monitor care workforce size, skills and training needs, labour rights and social protection coverage, alongside investment levels in the care sector.

A clear and transparent timeline to measure action

- Set a predefined duration of at least five years and publish a multi-annual roadmap integrating the Care Deal's policy measures and initiatives.
- Organise the roadmap around ambitious flagships and mainstream care considerations across EU policies wherever this supports the Care Deal's objectives.
- Schedule assessment and reporting at the mid-term and endpoint of the roadmap to identify shortcomings and gaps requiring future action.

Strengthened intersectional monitoring frameworks

- Create a structure for multi-stakeholder EU dialogue on care, that feeds concretely into policy design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and produces detailed, disaggregated data on the diversity of care needs and care recipients.
- Cover children and adults below and above 65 years old; care needs related to different disabilities, age and illness, including palliative care; unmet needs; risk of poverty; out-of-pocket costs; social protection coverage; type of care received; and territorial inequalities.
- Promote harmonised definitions for better EU comparisons and coordinate ECEC, long-term care (LTC) and work-life balance (WLB) monitoring for a lifelong, integrated view of care needs.

III. Proposed flagship initiatives

The European Commission should include the following nine flagship initiatives in the European Care Deal.

Flagship 1: Establish a European Care Platform and annual European Care Day

Establish a European Care Platform to support implementation of the Care Deal and foster multi-stakeholder EU dialogue on care policies, achieving greater transparency, better policy integration, and easier sharing of information and expertise.

- Bring together the European Commission, Member States, civil society, social economy actors, social services, trade unions, employers' organisations and researchers.
- Meet three times a year, including at least once in person.
- Ensure meaningful consultation with stakeholders throughout the development of European Care Deal policies and the preparation of reports assessing their implementation.
- Establish an annual European Day of Care on 29 October, with an awareness-raising campaign in line with the UN International day for care and support. The Platform could also meet in person on that day.

Flagship 2: Address workforce challenges and shortages

Address the conditions that affect the care workforce, including retention and recruitment, through concrete action and monitor workforce pressures and shortages closely.

- Assess implementation of the Platform-work directive and the Minimum wage directive in the care sector.
- Develop skills and competence reference frameworks to increase coherence in defining and recognising the different occupations in the care sector, and facilitating skills recognition, quality frameworks and training pathways.
- Propose legislative action on safe staffing levels, training requirements and occupational safety and health in the care sector, including through the upcoming Quality Jobs Act.
- Promote the development of recognised career pathways and access to continuous professional development, covering both person-centred skills and digital skills.

- Sustain investments through EU funding mechanisms for workforce development.
- Build on the Pact for Skills, Large Partnership for Skills in long-term care and its Sectoral Skills Strategy and extend its approach to skills anticipation and mutual learning to the whole care workforce, including disability support staff and personal assistants.
- Promote policies aimed at reducing the cost gap between declared and undeclared care work, including by sharing good practices on effective schemes and incentives, and set up some tools to facilitate the declaration of domestic and home care work.
- Take additional measures that cover staffing shortages, access to training, working conditions, wages, safety and health at work (including violence and harassment), professional development, inclusive sectoral dialogue and collective bargaining and mental health, with specific attention to vulnerable groups of care workers.

Flagship 3: Support regular pathways for migration and decent work for the migrant workforce

Improve pathways for labour migration for the different skills and occupations in the care sector, including for domestic work.

- Encourage Member States to ensure that all care sector occupations are considered eligible occupations for single permits or highly-qualified work permits, and that the migrant care workforce is not subject to unnecessary restrictions on recruitment.
- Establish a legally binding framework for care-worker migration pathways developed with the support of EU funds, with minimum requirements for transparent and fair recruitment, meaningful and structural worker engagement and clear standards for entry and residence procedures and permits. These requirements should ensure a high level of protection, including:
    - Permits with a minimum duration of two years, renewable, and allowing for periods of unemployment.
    - Equal treatment regarding labour rights, social security and access to services and housing, as well as stronger rights to family reunification.
    - Right to change employer, job and sector, and work for more than one employer.
    - Standards on employer-provided accommodation.

Flagship 4: Promote care-friendly innovation, digitalisation and AI use

Report on the best innovative solutions addressing care-sector challenges and direct EU investments towards technology that support the organisation, planning and delivery of high-quality care.

- Use digital, AI, assistive technologies, and other innovative technologies when efficient and ethical to complement and enhance, without replacing, personal interaction in care.
- Investigate solutions that foster partnerships and integration among formal and informal carers, as well as between health and social care services, and address gaps and barriers to the use of innovative solutions.
- Guarantee that technologies respect human dignity, data protection, safety, privacy and quality.
- Promote effective training pathways in innovative, digital and AI skills for the care workforce and informal carers.
- Promote the engagement of the care workforce and their representatives in discussions and planning around new technologies ahead of implementation.
- Promote social innovation and mutual learning by producing a comparative study on the offer of respite care services throughout the European Union, with a focus on their organisation, governance, coverage and impact.

Flagship 5: Close gaps in access and inclusion in European Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

Facilitate equal labour force participation of women and men, and children wellbeing, by ensuring that the right to participate in ECEC is universal and that vulnerable families and children with special needs and disabilities have equal access.

- Propose explicit EU and national targets tailored to the participation of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion in ECEC services, including all children targeted by the European Child Guarantee.
- Promote investment to expand ECEC coverage, reduce territorial disparities between more and less developed areas, and address workforce shortages.
- Set guidance on outreach to vulnerable families and families not currently accessing ECEC through proactive, targeted local outreach, especially to families who have disengaged or have low-income.

- Improve the accessibility, affordability and quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) by promoting more inclusive eligibility criteria, ensuring sufficient childcare places, reducing fees, and guaranteeing in both law and practice that all families can access services regardless of residence status, income, housing situation or parental employment status

- Recognise home-based childcare as complementary option to collective childcare.

- Kickstart a European-level policy action to support families in covering care needs during the child's first year of life, combining well-paid, non-transferable parental leave options with family-centred early support, including early childhood intervention services.

- Ensure that gender care gap and the childcare gap are closely monitored, with clear targets.

Flagship 6: Adopt a Council Recommendation on informal carers

Adopt a Council Recommendation to support informal carers and expand existing EU frameworks, including the 2022 Council Recommendation on access to affordable and high-quality long-term care.

- Recognise the diversity and heterogeneity of carers and their different needs, including related to age, disability or illness, their employment and residence situation, as well the circumstances of the person cared for. Address isolation, multiple caring roles, high-intensity care, socio-economic risk, exclusion from services and supports, and family composition, particularly single-parent and large families.

- Recommend that the care needs of informal carers are assessed, including physical and mental health, the willingness and capacity to provide care, as well as support and respite needs, and allow assessments to adapt to changing circumstances.

- Reach carers effectively and provide guidance on identifying informal carers and achieving successful outreach.

- Promote upward convergence in Member States and at local level through broad, inclusive legal definitions and access to information and simplified administrative procedures to facilitate the uptake of rights.

- Recommend targeted support and compensation measures with a clearly defined adequacy dimension that can be assessed and monitored in a disaggregated manner.

- Promote research, innovation and exchange of good practices on the effectiveness and adequacy of policies supporting family and informal carers.

- Alongside effective work-life balance and affordable, high-quality services, promote retention and reintegration of informal carers in employment through training and counselling, recognition of skills gained through informal caring, awareness-raising campaigns and internal support programmes in companies.

- Promote and support partnerships between formal and informal carers.

- Ensure that all the relevant indicators of the EU monitoring framework on long-term care cover persons with disability and their informal carers.

Flagship 7: Close the gender care gap and strengthen work-life balance

Based on the 2028 implementation report on the Work-Life Balance Directive, put forward a legislative proposal to address remaining gaps. Ensure that:

- Paternity leave is paid at the same level as maternity leave; that the adequacy of the payment or allowance for parental leave is clearly defined; and that an adequate payment or allowance is introduced for the carers' leave, at a level that can support the financial security of carers and gender equality.

- The conditions covered under the carers' leave are in line with the diversity of care needs and not narrowly restricted to extreme situations such as hospitalisation, terminal care or severe disabilities.

- Member States are explicitly prohibited from making entitlement to carers' leave and the force majeure leave subject to qualifying conditions.

- Carers do not lose social-security contributions because of taking carers' leave. To this end, the EU should facilitate the exchange of good practices between Member States.

- Support Member States in ensuring that periods of caregiving are adequately recognised and credited in pension systems.

- The right to request flexible working arrangements for parents and carers becomes an absolute right to obtain them, unless granting the right would impose a disproportionate burden on the employer. In complement, the EU should facilitate the exchange of good practices on supporting measures for employers.

- The right to obtain flexible working arrangements is not subject to a period of work qualification, particularly to support the retention of carers and single parents in the workforce.

- Explore legal action to combat workplace discrimination linked to caregiving responsibilities, thus expanding the protection granted under the Employment Equality Directive.

Flagship 8: Integrate and coordinate services at all levels

Support successful care coordination through different types of services, settings and locations, in view to build connections and bridges between health care, social care, education, social assistance, daily living support, or other forms of care.

- Promote continuous, accessible and comprehensive support through single entry points for information, administrative support, professionals or to be referred to relevant services.
- Promote administrative simplification and de-segmentation by assisting families and service users in accessing the broadest possible network of services through well-developed integrated support services at the local level. Simplification should facilitate procedures related to direct employment of care services by households.
- Recognise the importance of considering service users' and carers' perspectives when evaluating the quality of care coordination. Promote their consultation for the planning of such integrated services.
- Address interoperability issues and other barriers to administrative data sharing between relevant services and promote effective and secure digitalisation solutions, while guaranteeing data protection, including firewalls to ensure data collected in the context of service provision is not used for immigration enforcement purposes.

Flagship 9: Adopt Guidance on high-quality care services

In addition to addressing workforce challenges and encouraging adequate and guaranteed investments in the care sector, provide detailed guidance on high-quality care services, and ensure that:

- Clear quality targets are set to improve equal access to quality of services, by building upon the revised EU Voluntary Framework for social services, announced in the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy, and the EU Framework on Social Services of Excellence for people with disabilities, announced in the EU Strategy on the rights of persons with disabilities
- Member States use common indicators and comparable data to monitor the care quality in all care settings, working conditions, identify gaps and territorial inequalities, and guide targeted action to address them.
- Put forward recommendations and promote the exchange of good practices regarding appropriately designed individualised care plans, quality standards that apply to all care providers, effective complaints mechanisms and minimum requirements for well-functioning quality assurance bodies.
- Promote the involvement of service users and carers in the definition and evaluation of the quality of care services.

List of Signatories

AGE Platform

Autism Europe

Caritas Europa

CECOP

COFACE Families Europe

Disability Support Europe

EAPN

EFFE

EFSI

EPSU

Eurocarers

Eurodiaconia

EuroHealthNet

European Disability Forum

European Platform for Rehabilitation

European Women’s Lobby

Make Mothers Matter

Mental Health Europe

PICUM

Social Platform