

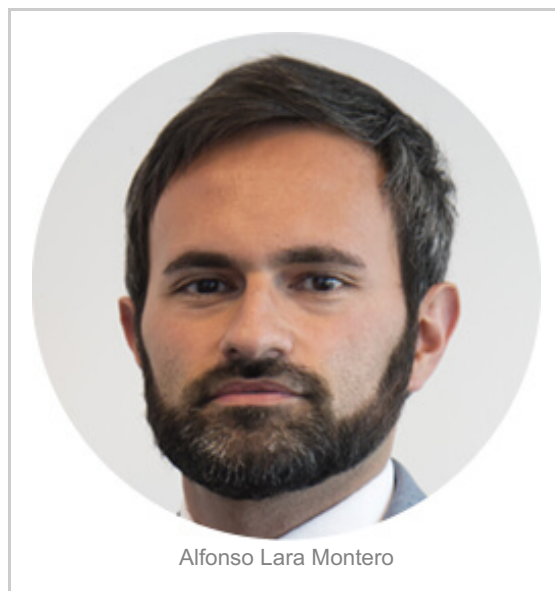
How Can Europe's Social Services Solve A Growing Recruitment Crisis?

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Against a backdrop of ageing societies and the associated increase in long-term conditions such as dementia, long-term care is growing in importance in all European countries. Socio-demographic changes, including family formation patterns, the geographical location of family members and changes in employment are challenging the sustainability of informal unpaid care and increasing demands on formal care services. Any such increase is likely to require an almost equal demand for a higher number of social services employees, while there are growing expectations of more responsive and higher-quality, tailored social services.



Recruiting enough people with the right qualifications and skills and keeping them in the workforce is therefore crucial for the sector. However, the social services workforce faces acute staff shortages in the majority of European countries. A key challenge is gender disparity and the pay gap. Overall, more than 80 per cent of those employed in the residential care and social work sectors in the EU are female. According to a European Commission [study](#), the gender pay gap in health and social work is higher than in the whole economy in most countries, especially Italy, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Poland and Portugal.

In our recent [publication](#), we reported the recruitment challenges highlighted by our members working in social services across Europe. Unsurprisingly, 73% of respondents to the questionnaires that formed the basis of our report identified poor wages as a major challenge in recruiting competent and reliable staff – combined with the impact of the financial crisis and budget cuts on the ability of local authorities to recruit and retain social services workers.

We also tried to identify ways of addressing the challenges faced by the sector in recruiting and retaining professionals. Training programmes are here regarded as important recruitment tools and can foster upward mobility that improves the poor image of many social services jobs. Reducing the threshold of skills and initial training requirements while providing tailored training schemes after recruitment is a way to attract people into the social services workforce. Another strategy concentrates on valuing the role of current workers, for instance by appointing them to become [‘care ambassadors’](#) to attract new workers.

Another policy direction has been introducing 'fast track' training programmes to attract graduates into social services. For example, the UK has established two fast-track schemes that are employer-led: The Step-Up to Social Work programme aimed at attracting graduates to children's social work and the Think Ahead programme aimed at fast-tracking them into mental health social work. Sweden has introduced a programme aimed at attracting newly arrived migrants and refugees to special courses that equip them with relevant qualifications in social services and language skills. This is part of a larger 'fast tracking' scheme that aims to recruit migrants into professions with labour shortages, including social work. In our report on integrated services, we documented how social services are also increasingly involving service users, for example by recruiting them as part of the team of professionals working with adults with mental health problems or with learning disabilities.

As our research work has revealed, recruitment challenges are complex and impact social services across Europe. The social services and care sectors eagerly await policy reforms that address the implementation of specific recruitment strategies, the provision of support and development opportunities, and ensuring adequate remuneration. Without a sustainable and valued workforce, public authorities cannot ensure consistently safe and high-quality care to elderly and vulnerable people across Europe.

Challenges in recruiting and retaining social services staff

