

EASPD Policy Paper

Towards the greening of the social service sector: from challenges to opportunities



European Association of Service providers
for Persons with Disabilities

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Rationale

European societies are undergoing a profound transformation driven by interconnected global challenges, including economic interdependence, technological innovation, demographic ageing, climate change, and environmental degradation. In recent years, climate and environmental crises have moved to the centre of the European policy agenda, notably through initiatives such as the European Green Deal and the EU's commitment to climate neutrality by 2050.¹

The impacts of environmental degradation and climate change are not evenly distributed. Evidence consistently shows that people in vulnerable situations are disproportionately affected. This includes persons with disabilities, older persons, people experiencing homelessness, and children at risk of poverty and social exclusion. Environmental risks, such as extreme weather events, energy poverty, housing instability, and disruptions to essential services, often exacerbate existing social inequalities.

For this reason, environmental and social objectives cannot be addressed in isolation, as they are closely interlinked. A just and inclusive green transition must ensure that climate action and social inclusion progress together, in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights.

The European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD) is the leading voice of disability services across Europe. Representing over 20,000 services in 50 different countries, we promote human rights and equal opportunities for persons with disabilities through effective and high-quality support. EASPD developed different reports and analytical papers dedicated to the greening of social services, many of which are linked in this paper, and participated in relevant projects, such as the *Green Enough* project² that promotes more sustainable practices in service provision. Based on our expertise and experience in the topic, we recognise that the green transition presents both challenges and opportunities for disability services.

Care and support services play a crucial role in promoting social inclusion and protecting fundamental rights. They provide essential support to persons in vulnerable situations. As Europe advances towards climate neutrality, these services must be supported to actively contribute to the green transition while continuing to deliver high-quality, accessible support.

Recent challenges, including extreme weather conditions³ and the cost-of-living and energy crises, have further demonstrated the essential nature of care and support services and their structural vulnerabilities. They have significantly affected service providers, highlighting the importance of sustainable frameworks that enable them to remain resilient while contributing to environmental objectives.

At the same time, demographic change, increasing life expectancy, and growing support needs mean that demand for care and support services is expected to rise. Climate-related developments will further increase this

¹ [The European Green Deal - European Commission](#)

² [Green Enough: Educational program to raise ecological behaviour through an inclusive methodology using Augmented Reality Technology - EASPD](#)

³ [Extreme weather: floods, droughts and heatwaves | In-depth topics | European Environment Agency \(EEA\)](#)

demand. Ensuring that care and support services transition towards environmentally sustainable models is therefore not only a matter of environmental responsibility but also of long-term service sustainability and quality.

Thus, supporting social services green transition is essential and it entails two dimensions. First, care and support providers need to reduce their environmental footprint by improving energy efficiency, adapting infrastructure, adopting sustainable procurement practices, and promoting environmentally responsible service delivery models. Second, they must be equipped with adequate support (financial, training, regulatory and technical) to manage changes associated with the green transition. Without such support, there is a risk that environmental requirements place disproportionate burdens on already overburdened social services.

This paper aims to:

- Underline the urgency of integrating environmental sustainability into the provision of social services for persons with disabilities.
- Provide key recommendations for social service providers and EU policymakers.
- Highlight promising practices adopted in different European countries that demonstrate how greener service delivery models can be implemented in practice.

Sustainable transformation in social services requires coordinated action, adequate investment, and policy coherence between social, environmental, employment, and economic frameworks. Only through an integrated approach that combines social inclusion with environmental responsibility can Europe achieve a just transition and build socially inclusive, climate-resilient economies and communities.

Introduction

Climate change and environmental degradation affect all Europeans; however, their impact is not evenly distributed across society. Persons with disabilities are likely to be disproportionately affected by climate and environmental changes, which may create additional barriers on top of those they already encounter and further restrict access to and enjoyment of their human rights⁴. For example, in situations of natural disasters or extreme weather events, the absence of accessible infrastructure, transport systems, or inclusive evacuation and relief plans can expose persons with disabilities to particularly serious risks. Energy poverty is another issue exacerbated by climate change that requires attention. Many persons with disabilities in Europe are already at higher risk of poverty, and rising energy costs linked to climate and energy transitions may further undermine their ability to maintain adequate living standards.⁵

Social service providers are also directly affected by climate change. Increasing demand for care and support services, combined with the need to adapt infrastructure and service models, requires significant resources. At the same time, rising inflation and higher energy and goods costs place additional financial pressure on service providers. Without adequate support, these factors may threaten both the sustainability of services and their environmental performance.

While it is true that these factors can only point to a negative future for the care and support sector, it is important to highlight that challenges, if properly addressed, can also represent crucial opportunities: social service providers can indeed seize the occasion to reorganise the way services are designed and offered and, therefore, make them greener and more sustainable in the long term.

As an example, rising inflation has also been an incentive to foster the adoption of sustainable measures that can help tackle the energy crisis. The EASPD report *“The impact of the rising cost of living on service providers in the disability sector”* has specifically examined how rising inflation, in particular the energy crisis, is putting the financial sustainability of both service providers and people who rely on support services at risk.⁶ Service providers across Europe have already started to use practices that can help them to cope with the rising prices. Among them are measures to reduce their energy, transport and waste consumption.

Greening the care and support sector goes beyond introducing environmentally friendly operations solutions or renovating energy-inefficient buildings. It also requires increasing environmental awareness, developing new skills and knowledge, and investing in upskilling and reskilling within the workforce. Importantly, persons with disabilities should also be actively involved in the redesign of services. Their lived experience can contribute to more innovative and inclusive solutions, ensuring that greener services reflect users’ needs and aspirations while respecting their dignity and rights, in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

⁴ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Analytical study on the promotion and protection of the rights of persons with disabilities in the context of climate change*, A/HRC/44/30, April 2020.

⁵ European Platform for Rehabilitation (EPR), *Moving Towards A Green Economy & Services For People With A Disability. An Analytical Paper*, Brussels.

⁶ Kozlowitz N., *The impact of the rising cost of living on service providers in the disability sector*, EASPD, Brussels, 2022.

In consideration of these factors, EASPD has prepared this paper to highlight the crucial need to shift to a greener social service sector and identify the main actions necessary to support social services in taking a meaningful step towards this transition. Firstly, the document presents a brief overview of the relevant policy initiatives adopted in recent years to support and promote the green transition. The paper then analyses how the social services sector takes a toll on the environment, thus demonstrating the need to find solutions that can support a green transformation of the sector. Recommendations for social service providers and policymakers are presented later and can be taken to move towards greener services. Lastly, the paper showcases some good practices on how service providers can mitigate their carbon footprint and adapt to the effects of climate change while empowering persons with disabilities in the green transition.

EU policy framework: Fair green transition

As already mentioned, the Green Deal has represented one of the key initiatives that has given rise to the green transition discussion, making it a top policy priority at the European level. With the expression “green transition” we refer to the transition or transformation from an intensive and unsustainable production and consumer system to a model that, instead, has environmental, social and economic sustainability as its core. Adopted in 2020, the Green Deal aims at favouring this transition by transforming Europe into a fair and prosperous society with a modern and competitive economy by 2050 by ensuring:

- No net emissions of greenhouse gases by 2050.
- Economic growth decoupled from resource use.
- No person and no place left behind.

Importantly for this paper, this package of initiatives emphasises that this transformation must take place in a fair and inclusive way, making sure that no one is left behind.⁷

Over time, other measures have been adopted to stress the importance of ensuring that the shift to a more sustainable future occurs by taking into account the needs and perspectives all people, including those in most vulnerable positions. For instance, in 2022, a Council Recommendation on ensuring a fair transition towards climate neutrality was adopted⁸, stressing that a fair transition shall ensure that no one is left behind and encouraging Member States to adopt measures that can support people most affected by the change and those already in vulnerable situations. The Just Transition Mechanism and the Social Climate Fund aim to mitigate the socio-economic impacts of decarbonisation policies, particularly for vulnerable households and workers.^{9 10} Furthermore, initiatives such as the Renovation Wave, REPowerEU and the EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate

⁷ [eas_006-21_study_eu_green_deal_v3.pdf](#)

⁸ The Recommendation is available here: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0801&from=EN>.

⁹ [The Just Transition Mechanism - European Commission](#)

¹⁰ [Social Climate Fund - Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion](#)

Change highlight the role of social services, accessible infrastructure and resilient care systems in achieving a climate-neutral and inclusive Europe.¹¹

Other policy initiatives promoted by the EU within the context of the care and support sector also addressed the green transition and the necessity to ensure that green adaptations benefit all groups equally, including persons with disabilities:

- EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 highlights the need to ensure that the green transition to a climate-neutral and resilient society is just and inclusive and involves persons with disabilities. The document also stresses that in order to “make Europe barrier-free, Member States should mainstream accessibility into all relevant policies and actions, notably those related to the European Green Deal, the Renovation Wave and the New European Bauhaus, and professionals should receive training in accessibility.”¹²
- The European Pillar of Social Rights and its Action Plan provide the broader social framework to ensure that climate neutrality goes hand in hand with social fairness.¹³
- EU Care Strategy, launched in 2022, points out the need for care settings to adapt to climate change in order to increase their resilience to external shocks and better protect vulnerable people, like older people, from the negative consequences of extreme meteorological events.¹⁴
- Disability Employment Package, one of the flagship initiatives of the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030, foresees the introduction of measures to ensure that the transition to a lower carbon and resource-efficient economy does not affect negatively the most vulnerable workers.¹⁵

Despite the attention given in EU policies to the need for equitable climate adaptation that also benefits vulnerable groups, further action is required to translate this commitment into practice. Ensuring that no one is left behind calls for a holistic approach that addresses the multiple factors contributing to climate impacts and guarantees the meaningful involvement of vulnerable groups in the design and implementation of policies. Such an approach is essential to prevent the emergence of new inequalities and the reinforcement of existing ones.

The challenge: Environmental footprint of the social care sector

Social services play a key role in enabling people in vulnerable positions to have the fullest access and fullest capacity to enjoy their human rights on an equal basis with others. Their work can be even more important when these people are faced with situations that can multiply and exacerbate their existing vulnerabilities, such

¹¹ https://energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/energy-efficiency/energy-performance-buildings/renovation-wave_en ,
https://commission.europa.eu/topics/energy/repowereu_en ,
https://climate.ec.europa.eu/eu-action/adaptation-and-resilience-climate-change/eu-adaptation-strategy_en

¹² European Commission, *COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS, Union of Equality: Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030*, COM(2021) 101 final, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021.

¹³ [European Pillar of Social Rights - Building a fairer and more inclusive European Union - Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion](#)

¹⁴ European Commission, *Communication From The Commission To The European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic And Social Committee And The Committee Of The Regions on the European care strategy*, {SWD(2022) 440 final}, Brussels, 2022.

¹⁵ European Commission, *Disability Employment Package to improve labour market outcomes for persons with disabilities*, <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1597&langId=en>.

as in the case of events caused by climate change and environmental degradation. At the same time, care and support have an impact on the environment as well. This is due to its energy consumption, transport emissions, the generation of waste and the use of spaces and buildings required to carry out activities. Among them, EASPD identified the following ones as the most important drivers of the social care sector environmental footprint:

- **Old infrastructures and inadequate energy management of care facilities**

Often, care facilities are characterised by infrastructure that is old, built under low-quality requirements, not designed for the changing weather conditions, and thus having a high carbon footprint. Improved isolation, instead, can improve energy efficiency and reduce energy costs. Moreover, when facilities are not constructed to be resilient to climate change, people are more exposed to the risk of being subject to environmental hazards. It should be noted that outdated infrastructures are mainly typical of large residential institutions. This means that a shift towards more community-based and person-centred forms of services,¹⁶ in addition to being fundamental to ensuring that persons with disabilities fully enjoy their human rights, can also have a beneficial impact on the environment.

An additional factor that must be taken into consideration is that certain disabilities or conditions have also consequences regarding energy consumption in care facilities. For instance, people with mobility difficulties might tend to spend more time indoors, adding heating and lighting costs; persons with disabilities may also need a higher ambient temperature in cold seasons. Other energy costs affecting care facilities can include extra laundry costs, extra costs of cooking because of dietary requirements, the use of electrical aids or equipment, or the need to charge batteries for electric vehicles such as wheelchairs.¹⁷ Switching to renewable energy or adopting smart solutions can therefore present meaningful climate change mitigation measures to be adopted in the care sector. Using energy powered by solar, wind and other sources of zero-carbon electricity in the care facilities would drastically reduce their environmental impact.

While implementing these measures may take some time, other energy-saving solutions can be more easily and quickly adopted. For instance, smart solutions for temperature and lights management can constitute small investments that, however, can bring significant results.¹⁸ Clearly, all these interventions must be done in a way that does not affect the well-being and the quality of life of persons with disabilities, thus preventing the occurrence of health risks for them.

It is important to stress that better energy management can also lead to substantial savings. This is particularly relevant considering the current energy crisis and the resulting increased costs that are negatively impacting on the activities of social service providers and people who rely on them.

¹⁶ [First Reflections on EU Framework on Social Services of Excellence for persons with disabilities.pdf](#)

¹⁷ Bernardeau A.B., Ferri Sanz M., Ferrando García M., *Research on the European Green Deal and Social Services*, EASPD, Brussels, 2020.

¹⁸ An example is the use of automatic lighting control with sensors, through which lighting can be reduced or turned off or on under certain conditions. Another solution can be the use of smart thermostats that can set the automatic regulation of temperature of an environment or that can turn on and off the heating at specific times.

Lastly, it must not be forgotten that offering a more environmentally friendly workplace can be beneficial to the personnel working in the care facilities and, consequently, become an incentive to attract workers in a sector increasingly affected by staff shortages.

- **Inefficient management of goods in the social service sector**

Social service facilities produce high amounts of waste, including hazardous waste, that must be reduced and taken care of in the right way. The production of waste is due to the usage of many disposable goods required by older people or persons with disabilities, such as diapers and medicines, which usually cannot be reused or recycled. Moreover, goods and appliances such as dryers, washing machines, and wheelchairs, which are generated in large measure in care facilities, often are separated from the main waste disposal streams and recycled, although some of them are disposed of, producing rubber and metals to enter waste streams. Of course, depending on the type of facilities (respite homes, day-care homes, etc.), the type and amount of waste vary significantly, with large residential institutions being responsible for producing larger quantities.

Another issue is related to water consumption as facilities of the social care sector consume significant amounts of water through hygiene installations or heating and cooling devices.

In addition to this, different studies have analysed the environmental impact of catering services and food delivery in care facilities across Europe, finding that a great amount of material is discarded, a factor that also contributes to natural resource depletion and environmental pollution. Food waste can be related to several factors, which can be: economic (organisation of food businesses, integration along the food chain, management choices); legal and political (inefficient legislation of the food sectors and other related fields); linked to the social context (users' behaviours and choices); and technical. In contrast to residential long-term care facilities, food consumption in home care is managed on a smaller scale, taking into account the user's preferences and needs. This means that, in these cases, lower amounts of food are usually generated and discarded.¹⁹

- **Transport emissions**

Transport is responsible for a large share of the EU's greenhouse gas emissions and is among the major contributors to climate change.²⁰ Most care providers rely on using cars or buses to provide their service, especially when it comes to services that involve staff travelling to a particular building or an individual's home to deliver care or support. This results in social services contributing to carbon pollution. Moreover, long-term care facilities and social houses are often placed in suburban or exurban areas that often lack appropriate public transportation options, thus forcing workers to travel to their workplace with their own cars.²¹

Furthermore, with the rising prices of fuel, travelling by car is becoming more and more expensive, a factor that can impact both the costs incurred by service providers and the quality of care people receive. Those who do not

¹⁹ *Ibidem.*

²⁰ www.europarl.europa.eu, *Climate change in Europe: facts and figures*, accessible here: [Climate change in Europe: facts and figures | News | European Parliament \(europa.eu\)](#) (last access on 24.04.2023).

²¹ Bernardeau A.B., Ferri Sanz M., Ferrando García M., op.cit.

have the financial means to bear these rising costs may be restricted in their travel and, therefore, have more limited possibilities to get access to the services they need.

- **Lack of training on green skills for the care workers**

Another important element that should be considered is that a significant majority of care workers have never received training on topics related to environmental sustainability and climate mitigation measures in their work and lives. However, it is clear that all individuals play a significant role in contributing to climate change with their daily activities; at the same time, everyone can take steps to reduce their own carbon footprint and become more sustainable. Acquiring new knowledge and skills on sustainability and green practices is therefore fundamental to encourage and facilitate care workers in adopting more eco-friendly solutions in the delivery of services. This, in turn, can help them to provide better support to persons with disabilities, who are among the most impacted by the consequences of climate change. Making sustainability a key value in determining the basic requirements of quality care would therefore ensure a balanced approach to care and environmental protection in a way that can benefit all facets of society.

Furthermore, offering more opportunities for professional development and training on how to deal with the most prominent challenges affecting our society and the care sector can also be another effective way to attract more workers and tackle the problem of staff shortages.

It must be noted that ensuring that social services providers get adequate training opportunities can often be challenging due to underfunding and lack of investment in the sector, despite the increasing recognition that this will be crucial for the implementation of a fair and inclusive green transition.

Addressing this issue will therefore be another key step towards tackling the lack of green training opportunities for care workers.

- **Lack of environmental awareness of persons with disabilities**

Persons with disabilities can be particularly affected by environmental issues; however, they usually have more difficult access to training and awareness-raising programmes on sustainability issues and green skills.²² This, of course, may lead them to be unaware of the impact their actions can have on the environment and be less prepared to adopt more eco-friendly practices. Generally, persons with disabilities are less educated on environmental topics for several reasons. In the case of older people, sustainability issues have emerged more prominently in recent years and are only now beginning to be included in school curricula. As a consequence of this, elderly people who need support have not had the opportunity to be educated on these topics. At the same time, nowadays, programs aiming to raise ecological behaviour which are accessible and adapted to persons with disabilities are still rare. Although they may be aware of the need to adopt more sustainable practices and become more eco-friendly in their daily lives, if information is not provided in an accessible manner, it can be challenging for persons with disabilities to obtain the right and adequate knowledge. This is especially true for people with developmental and/or intellectual disabilities for whom it can be difficult to access and participate

²² *Ibidem.*

in trainings and educational programs available in mainstream settings if educational materials are not adapted to their needs.

Nevertheless, acquiring awareness of and sensitivity to environmental issues is crucial to instil in persons with disabilities a sense of responsibility and urgency regarding their actions and encourage them to adopt a more ecological behaviour in their daily life routine. Except for the benefits to the environment, this will also allow persons with disabilities to be more implicated and included in relevant discussions and interventions supporting the green transition, making a step towards social inclusion.

Recommendations for social service providers and policy makers

The analysis made in the previous section has shown how important and urgent it is to promote the shift to a greener, more sustainable and, therefore, more resilient social service sector. Investments to support social services in adapting to the requirements and challenges posed by climate change will not only benefit the environment but also have multiple positive effects in the long-term:

- Health benefits for social service providers and people who rely on care and support services, as a consequence of less pollution emitted by the care and support system.
- Substantial financial savings, thanks to improved energy efficiency and a consequent reduction in running costs.
- Important social and community benefits, resulting from the promotion of the use of local procurement of goods and services for the provision of food and other goods in the care facilities.
- Innovative models of care and workforce development, following the introduction of new ways of delivering services and new training opportunities for the social service staff.

EASPD has identified a set of recommendations that can support social service providers and policy-makers in fostering the green transformation of the care and support sector and in turning the current challenges in opportunities for a greener and more inclusive model of service delivery in the future. The recommendations are the following:

1. Promote a design and renovation of care facilities that increase their energy efficiency

Designing climate change-resilient buildings and renovating old infrastructures by introducing energy-efficient solutions can be an effective way to drastically reduce the environmental impact of care facilities. Moreover, resilient infrastructures can better ensure the safety and well-being of people by protecting them from natural disasters (floods, hurricanes, heatwaves, etc.) that might emerge as a consequence of climate change²³. At the same time, investments in solutions that can guarantee better energy management can both reduce energy consumption and lead to substantial financial savings in the long-term.

²³ For instance, care facilities that are located in urban areas with a lot of concrete and little green space can be at risk from the “heat island effect”, whereby the heat is retained and temperatures can rise to seven to eight degrees higher than in surrounding areas. Working or having access to care and support services in this type of environment can be therefore particularly challenging and unsafe. Reset Vlaanderen, *Coping with climate change in the care sector. Workers’ guide*, Brussels.

It is important to stress that all investments in this regard should support the deinstitutionalisation process, and therefore should not be used with the aim of maintaining and renovating institutions. Furthermore, all measures should be implemented ensuring accessibility, in accordance with Article 9 of the UNCRPD on accessibility. The Convention specifically states that achieving accessibility involves the identification and elimination of obstacles and barriers in the built environment, and in information, communications and other services. As a consequence of this, the inaccessibility of environmental measures can severely affect their effectiveness and reinforces social inequities by limiting opportunities for a significant part of the population to contribute to the green transition and provide innovative ideas and practices. Furthermore, designing for inclusion also costs less in the long term as it can ensure all requirements and needs are captured from the beginning instead of being tackled later, thus preventing the emergence of additional costs due to adaptations to be made in the future.

2. Offer more sustainable transportation and working arrangement options

To reduce the emissions caused by transportation, as well as minimise the costs of commuting, the use of eco-friendly solutions (electric or hybrid vehicles) and public transport should be actively promoted. However, to ensure this, it is essential that, where necessary, action is taken to upgrade the public transport network so that services can be offered with adequate frequency, at affordable costs and in an accessible way.

The mitigation of emissions can also be achieved by promoting the decentralisation of some services in order to provide them at the neighbourhood level. In this way, people's mobility is reduced (less pollution) and, at the same, the access to services is facilitated and increased (especially for people with mobility problems).²⁴

Another way to minimise the environmental impact of the care sector is to offer alternative working arrangements to the care personnel. An example can be the use of online platforms to deliver services. Online platforms can potentially help persons with support needs - and their families - to access both care and non-care services in a better, far more flexible, potentially cheaper and greener way than existing offerings.²⁵

Having said that, it is important to underline that these measures should be implemented in a way that does not compromise the well-being and the rights of both people who benefit from care and support services and the care workers. For instance, reducing the use of cars for commuting must not cause a decrease in service provision in the event of a lack of alternative means of transport (for example, individuals at home requiring care and support services should keep receiving the necessary number of visits at their place, although this can cause more pollution).

At the same time, it has been noted that online platforms can also give raise to several negative implications, both with regard to the rights of online care workers and the people benefitting from these services. For this reason, the promotion of this type of working arrangement should always be made in a careful way, taking into account the individual needs and always making the quality of the services offered a priority.

²⁴ Bernardeau A.B., Ferri Sanz M., Ferrando García M., op.cit.

²⁵ For more information on this topic, you can refer to the EASPD paper on the emergence of online platforms in the social care and support sector, accessible here: https://www.easpd.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/Publications/Online_platforms_paper.pdf.

3. Ensure training opportunities, upskilling and reskilling of care workers

In order to provide greener and high-quality social services, it is necessary to ensure that social workers themselves acquire new skills and knowledge about sustainability, energy efficiency and waste management. This will enable them to incorporate the lessons learned into their daily work, which in the long run would lead to multiple benefits, such as:

- A higher quality of services that can better support the people who rely on them.
- A consequent improvement in people's well-being that would lead to a reduction in the economic cost that health inequalities may cause.
- A lower impact on the environment.
- An increasing economic long-term sustainability of the services offered.

Training opportunities can be offered on different topics, including:

- Recycling.
- Sustainable management of food (e.g., promoting local value chains for the acquisition of food, prioritising catering services more sustainable, importance of adopting a more sustainable diet).
- Green public procurement.
- Sustainable water consumption.

It is important to emphasise that, when implementing measures such as those aimed at reducing waste and water consumption, the stakeholders involved should be aware that everything must be done taking into account the local socio-economic and cultural environment as well as the consumer safety and health.

The importance of providing people with the appropriate skills to cope with the green transition is also emphasised in the new European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience launched by the European Commission in 2020.²⁶ The Agenda specifically focuses on promoting actions that can ensure that the right training, the right skills and the right support is offered to people in Europe to face the green transition and cope with their up- and reskilling needs. Indeed, in a society with increasingly changing and complex needs, continuous learning can really make a difference. Providing the care workforce with adequate training opportunities will therefore allow the care staff to take full advantage of the green transition and in being more prepared to face and participate in the care sector transformation. Furthermore, having the right skills also means being able to easily find and stay employed, a particularly important factor for workers involved in a sector - such as the social care one, characterised by poor working conditions and scarce opportunities for career development.

Lastly, we must not forget that a trained and skilled staff will not only be able to reduce the ecological footprint of the services provided, but also properly support people who rely on these services in more easily and effectively adapting to the changes caused by the green transformation.

²⁶ European Commission, European Skills Agenda For Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness And Resilience, Brussels, 2020.

4. Promote awareness raising about and involvement in the development of green measures of persons with disabilities

Persons with disabilities and vulnerable groups have the potential to personally contribute to building a greener society. However, as already highlighted in this paper, they usually have fewer opportunities to be sensitised and trained on sustainability issues. Similarly, persons with disabilities are often excluded when it comes to policy and programme design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Nevertheless, not taking into due consideration the needs and views of all groups can seriously jeopardise the effectiveness of any green measure adopted, further exacerbating inequalities and exclusion and preventing the achievement of the goal of a just and inclusive green transition. To prevent this from happening, it will be essential to:

- Increase training opportunities for persons with disabilities on environmental sustainability issues. This can be particularly important considering that promoting more community-based and home-based solutions for persons with disabilities means giving them greater autonomy and more control over the choices concerning the support they want and need to receive. It is therefore fundamental that persons with disabilities learn how to adopt ecologically driven behaviours in their daily lives, in order to reduce energy consumption and waste production at home and make choices in a more environmentally friendly manner. The same applies to their families and caregivers.

In connection with this, it is extremely important that training programmes and information materials on sustainability issues are always offered in an accessible manner. Persons with disabilities are not a homogeneous group, which means that they may encounter different barriers when exercising their rights. For this reason, when raising awareness and providing information on specific issues, the different needs and requirements of people must always be taken into account and properly accommodated.

- Promote a co-production approach centralised around the “nothing about us without us” principle when it comes to the development of green solutions and strategies. Persons with disabilities, their families, service providers and their representative organisations must be adequately consulted and provided with the necessary space to make their voices heard in the green transition process. Only in this way will it be possible to make sure that the solutions adopted can truly be sustainable and beneficial for both service providers and the people who rely on their services. At the same time, ensuring the involvement of all stakeholders means being able to benefit from their knowledge and experience, a factor that can facilitate the development of effective innovative solutions.

Furthermore, adopting a co-production approach in the green transformation of care services can also lead to greater ownership on the part of both service providers and persons with disabilities, thus resulting in a greater commitment to contributing to a greener and more sustainable society.

5. Foster the integration of technology

It is clear now more than ever that the digital and green transitions are intrinsically connected and that is impossible to achieve one without the other. Nowadays, technology is rapidly changing the way people live and work. Technological developments are also increasingly providing care and support services with opportunities to develop new ways of delivering their services and for the people they support to benefit from them.²⁷ Considering the fast advance of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, EASPD explored the opportunities and challenges of using it in social services in its paper *“Unlocking the Potential of Artificial Intelligence in Social Services.”*²⁸

The advancement of digital technologies can represent an effective way to boost the greening of social services, providing more sustainable solutions to be implemented in the sector, without reducing commitment to individually focused support and to the quality of the services provided. More specifically, the use of technological solutions can favour:

- The use of renewable energy sources and equipment can lead to better energy management.
- The digitalisation of administrative procedures, avoiding, when possible, the use of paper, and simplifying bureaucracy.
- The promotion of online platform work, whenever this is possible, useful and valuable.

Apart from ensuring that the right infrastructure is in place to guarantee digital connectivity, in order to ensure an effective implementation of digital solutions, it is necessary to provide meaningful opportunities for people's digital skills development. Such opportunities must be offered to care workers, as well as to persons with disabilities and their families and caregivers.

6. Securing adequate funding to support the green transition of the care sector

The lack of funding can be a major challenge in preventing social service providers from making investments in energy-saving solutions. Insufficient financial resources can also hamper the capacity to offer training opportunities and implement raising awareness activities. Moreover, a lack of funding from governments may prevent social services from putting into practice previously adopted sustainable solutions that would speed up their transformation to a greener service delivery model.

Nowadays, the EU offers multiple funding schemes to support the green transition and the inclusion of vulnerable groups in the process. It is therefore key that these resources are used and channelled effectively and that social service providers are aware of and able to have access to the available funding opportunities. Among them:

- The European Social Fund+ (ESF+), which can offer opportunities for the capacity building of the social services staff and enhance employment opportunities in green sectors.

²⁷ Bignal T., Schembri S.B., Fragniere E., Hoogerwerf E., Leventi K., Muñoz S., Nanchen B., Sandabad Y., *Technology in Social Care and Support Services. A policy paper from the Person-centred Technology Membership Forum of EASPD*, EASPD, Brussels, accessible here: https://www.easpd.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/Publications/EASPD_PCT_paper.pdf.

²⁸ [EASPD Unlocking the Potential of Artificial Intelligence AI in Social Services.pdf](#)

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- The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), which can finance interventions to promote, among the others, climate change adaptation, resource efficiency, sustainable transport, and sustainable employment.
- The Just Transition Fund, which foresees, for instance, investments in research and innovation, environmental rehabilitation, clean energy and up- and reskilling of workers.
- The Horizon Europe and Erasmus+, which can provide social service providers funds to implement green projects, have access to green training and promote green jobs.
- The Recovery and Resilience Facility, which can support the implementation of green and renewable technologies, the promotion of energy efficiency in buildings, as well as the digitalisation of public services.

While the new European budget for 2028-2034 is being negotiated (Multiannual Financial Framework, MFF) and many of these funding opportunities are under risk, EASPD emphasises the need to preserve and increase budget available for social services and maintain the necessary conditionalities to ensure that social inclusion and support for persons with disabilities remain central priorities in Europe's future funding architecture.²⁹

As a last remark, the analysis presented in this paper has repeatedly pointed out that institutional care is responsible to a larger extent for the negative impact that the care sector has on the environment compared to community-based and home-based services. This could therefore be a further incentive to promote the shift towards more person-centred models of care delivery. Fostering the use of personalised support models, such as personal budgets, can also contribute to reducing the environmental impact of the care sector. For instance, having control over the choices regarding the type of support they want to receive, personal budget holders can be empowered to make more environmentally conscious choices. These measures should of course, be combined with the development of programmes aimed at sensitising people in need of care and support as well as service providers on environmental sustainability issues.

Promising greening practices of social service providers for persons with disabilities

Sharing experiences and good practices is essential to building a strong evidence base and facilitating replication across Member States. EASPD has published a [report that highlights 11 promising practices](#) carried out by social service providers for persons with disabilities from Spain, Greece, Austria, France, Finland, Malta, Israel, and a European project. The report acknowledges that service providers have the potential to enable an inclusive green transition and aims at facilitating the exchange of experiences and good practices, as well as to create a strong evidence base for future action.

The best-case practices showcased in the report have been selected according to three criteria:

- The practices are sustainable, tackle issues related to climate change and aim at empowering persons with disabilities in the green transition.

²⁹ [EASPD at the forefront of EU Budget negotiations - EASPD](#)

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- They are the result of a co-design that takes into account the opinions, needs and wishes of persons with disabilities.
- The practices are in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which stresses the importance of respecting persons with disabilities' freedom of choice and their right to have control over their lives.

This goal can be reached through several different strategies, among which training on green skills for persons with disabilities, ad hoc training programmes for social services professionals and architectural intelligence for making living facilities accessible and green.

The practices presented in this report demonstrate that the greening of care and support services is both feasible and replicable, providing concrete evidence that our recommendations are implementable and offering practical models that can serve as best practices for service providers and policymakers across Europe. They also prove that persons with disabilities and service providers can and need to be actively engaged in their design.

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