

EASPD Position Paper

Second phase of the strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities 2021 - 2030



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Introduction

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 over 46 different countries, we promote human rights and equal opportunities for people with disabilities through effective and high-quality support. Our members provide support to millions of persons with disabilities across Europe, in areas such as day-to-day living, housing, employment, education and training, early childhood intervention, participation in the community, arts, culture and sports and much more. It is based on this extensive experience in service delivery that EASPD contributes to the second phase of the European Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030.

The EU is uniquely positioned to implement the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). With established support systems and thousands of proven practices across Member States, the challenge is to ensure that the policy and legal framework, the mainstream and specialised services on the ground, the economic and funding environment all adapt to fully reflect the UNCRPD. Building on what has worked best in the first phase of the Strategy, EASPD's proposals for the next phase focus on turning good practice into good policy, and good policy into effective, rights-based support systems across Europe. This paper highlights key areas where the European Union (EU) can build on its existing strengths, focusing on measures that advance autonomy, inclusion, and equality. Our contribution follows the structure of the current Strategy, addressing its key areas with practical recommendations drawn from the realities of support provision across Europe:

- **Accessibility and assistive technology are two sides of the same coin.** Treating them separately has left Europe with fragmented services, limited access, and an underdeveloped welfare technology market. The next phase of the Strategy must bring them together through a European Strategy for Assistive Technology and Accessibility, ensuring that universal design, specialised technologies, and support services function as a single system to remove barriers and enable autonomy across the EU.
- **Freedom of movement for persons with disabilities can only be realised by ensuring access to appropriate support for those who move.** The second phase of the Strategy offers a clear opportunity to build on the EU Disability Card and lay the foundations for continuity of disability status, access to support, and shared responsibility between Member States.
- **Quality of life and independent living are built over a lifetime and start early.** Early Childhood Intervention and inclusive education are decisive in preventing segregation and institutionalisation, yet progress across Member States remains uneven. At the same time, too many people with disabilities still lack access to community-based services. The next phase of the Strategy should respond with a life-course approach: prioritising children with disabilities, developing an EU Strategy on the transition from institutional to community-based care, establishing a Framework on Social Services of Excellence to ensure rights translate into everyday support, and implementing a European Disability Employment and Skills Guarantee to enable full participation in the labour market throughout people's lives.

- **Equal access and non-discrimination require targeted action to remove persistent structural barriers.** Strengthening legal capacity and supported decision-making, reviving comprehensive EU anti-discrimination protection, and ensuring inclusive access to culture, sport, and leisure are essential to translating rights into everyday reality for persons with disabilities.
- **Disability rights cannot be addressed in isolation from broader EU social and economic policy.** Systematic mainstreaming across initiatives on skills, employment, social rights, child protection, and housing is essential. This must be supported by effective use of EU funding, coordination structures, and knowledge exchange to ensure real progress for persons with disabilities.

1. Learnings from the first phase of the European Disability Rights Strategy

The EU is in a unique global position when implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Unlike many other regions, the EU already has a relatively well-developed disability support system. The main challenge is not building a new system from scratch but radically transforming the existing one.

This situation creates both a challenge and an opportunity. The EU has an established support system in all Member States. This includes over 20,000 disability support providers that employ millions of workers. These organisations have decades of experience providing support to people with disabilities. However, this experience includes both good and bad elements. Some support models are outdated and need radical change. But there are also thousands of good practices, often developed at the local level, that align well with the Convention. Sometimes this progress happened because of good policies. Too often, it happened despite the policies in place.

At EASPD, we believe that good practice should shape good policy. Good policy should then help build good support systems. These systems should deliver on UNCRPD principles.

The first phase of the European Disability Rights Strategy worked best when it focused on **concrete actions and practical guidance**. For example, the [Disability Employment Package](#), especially the Study on Alternative Employment Models, looked at real examples from across Europe. It showed how things are currently done, and more importantly, how they can be improved. This work continues to influence policy and practice discussions in EU countries. Another example is the [Guidance on Independent Living](#). Whilst the content itself was not particularly new, its impact came from being directly connected to billions of euros in EU funding.

It is on this basis that EASPD makes its proposals for the 2nd phase of the European Disability Rights Strategy, which focuses on maximising the European Union's strengths to help Europe deliver on the UNCRPD. This includes a range of legislative, non-legislative, funding, mutual learning, research and more.

2. Accessibility: an enabler of rights, autonomy, and equality

2.1 A European Strategy for Assistive Technology and Accessibility

The next phase of the Strategy should recognise that assistive technology and accessibility are two sides of the same coin. Accessible and universal design benefit all and reduces the need for specialised aids, while robust assistive technology ecosystems can ensure that specialised solutions are available and affordable, and responsive to specific needs. Together with accessibility measures and appropriate support services, assistive technology forms the foundation for removing environmental, digital, and societal barriers across the EU.

According to the World Health Organization, **assistive technology** (AT) encompasses the knowledge, products, and services that enable people to function independently in their daily lives, supporting mobility, vision, hearing, communication, cognition, and self-care. They range from wheelchairs and hearing aids to digital tools like software and mobile applications.¹ Despite their importance, [current estimates](#) indicate that only 5% to 15% of the people globally have access to assistive technology, highlighting a significant and persistent gap.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is becoming a core component of assistive and welfare technologies, with significant potential to enhance accessibility, personalisation, and independence for persons with disabilities. EASPD, in its [position on the EU's Apply AI Strategy](#), emphasises the importance of harnessing this potential through a human-centred and rights-based approach to AI within social services. This involves promoting inclusive design, transparency, and accountability, as well as the meaningful involvement of persons with disabilities and service providers throughout the development, testing, and implementation of AI-driven solutions, ensuring that innovation actively contributes to inclusion rather than reinforcing existing barriers.

In this context, **welfare technology** refers to solutions that improve the efficiency, quality, and sustainability of welfare services, particularly in care, health, and social support. Examples include lifting aids, shower toilets, eating supports, and telemedicine. Denmark's [national strategy for digitalisation](#) shows how such technologies can strengthen welfare services, free up staff resources, and help citizens live more independently.

Assistive technology can enhance support provision when thoughtfully integrated, as demonstrated by Belgium's [Lichtwerk cooperative](#), which uses visual guidance technology to project work instructions directly onto workstations. This helps people with intellectual disabilities, non-native speakers, and those returning to work after severe illness to learn and perform complex tasks in employment settings. In this context, **assistive technology centres** are key intermediaries that ensure citizens can effectively access, adopt, and sustain the use of assistive technology across different life domains. These independent centres provide comprehensive and sustained assistance, from tailored assessments, training, research, and ongoing support, to facilitating reasonable accommodation in education and employment, and advocacy. While recognised centres of excellence exist in some countries, such as the longstanding Italian network of AT centres², such structured

¹ https://www.who.int/europe/health-topics/assistive-technology#tab=tab_1

² <https://www.imintalesproject.eu/glic/>

models remain uneven and not yet widespread across Europe, where access, governance, and service provision still vary significantly.

Currently, all the above-mentioned elements remain fragmented across Member States, and Europe's welfare technology market remains underdeveloped, despite demographic challenges and technological opportunities. The next phase of the Strategy should explicitly link accessibility with the development, availability, and deployment of assistive and welfare technologies, harness the potential of AI within social services, and ensure that these technologies are developed through rights-based, human-centred, and inclusive approaches. An integrated **European Strategy for Assistive Technology and Accessibility** is essential to ensure these components work together systematically to remove barriers to participation.

Achieving this approach requires more than single-market mechanisms; it demands political prioritisation and targeted market investment. These measures can deliver real accessibility, autonomy, and quality support for people with disabilities, while fostering innovation, high-quality services, and sustainable markets for assistive and welfare technologies across Europe.

Proposed actions on Assistive Technology and Accessibility:

- Develop a **European Strategy for Assistive Technology and Accessibility**: as a first step, conduct a comprehensive **EU-wide study** on assistive technology and accessibility, including the use of AI and welfare technologies, the role of assistive technology in support provision, and the different models of assistive technology centres; mapping current provision and identifying gaps, as well as best policies and practices.
- Based on results:
 - Develop and pilot **assistive technology centres** in Member States where they are lacking or underdeveloped, with the goal of eventual Europe-wide implementation.
 - Establish **national strategies** in each Member State, inspired by Denmark's model, combining clear policy direction, dedicated funding, and cross-sector collaboration.
 - Promote **integration of assistive technology** into inclusive education, employment, and daily living, ensuring accessibility and availability for all users.
- Link the Strategy to **EU funding**, including the current and future budget, to support implementation, capacity building, and sustainability, ensuring the Competitiveness Fund explicitly references these priorities.
- Develop a **subgroup of the Disability Platform** to support the development of this initiative and in the exchange of promising practices to ensure co-designed it with all relevant stakeholders.

3. Enjoying EU rights

3.1 Enhance cross-EU mobility for persons with disabilities: Directive for full freedom of movement of persons with disabilities

In practice, persons with disabilities do not benefit from the freedom of movement for work across the EU to the same extent as other European citizens, largely because national disability assessments and support schemes are not designed to operate across borders, or even in different regions of the same Member State. As a result, relocating for work or long-term residence can create significant barriers, affecting access to benefits, services, and support. Building on existing initiatives such as the **EU Disability Card**, the second phase of the Strategy provides an opportunity to remove these barriers and ensure equal mobility rights for all.

Proposed actions to enhance freedom of movement for people with disabilities:

- Conduct a **dedicated EU-level study** to assess barriers to cross-border mobility, examine the comparability and functioning of national disability assessment systems, and evaluate the impact on the provision and capacity of support services.
- Promote a **directive on shared responsibility** between Member States for disability support for EU citizens relocating long-term, including:
 - **Portability of disability status and benefits** from the Member State of origin until residence is established and a new assessment is completed.
 - Measures to **facilitate or accelerate assessment procedures** and prevent undue delays in recognition.
- Establish **EU-level mechanisms**, including funding, to offset differences in disability allowances and personal budgets between Member States, ensuring that financial support remains adequate and proportionate to the cost of living in the host country.

4. Decent quality of life and living independently

4.1 Focus on children with Disabilities: Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) and inclusive education

A significant gap in the first phase of the European Disability Rights Strategy was the lack of attention given to children with disabilities and their families, despite this being the stage of life which can have the biggest impact on an individual's future quality of life and independent living.

Research consistently [shows](#) that timely, appropriate support in early childhood reduces long-term disadvantages, an even more so children with developmental issues. This was powerfully illustrated by Nicole Sophie Marino's testimony at the European Day of Persons with Disabilities, which highlighted how early and adequate support shaped her life trajectory and enabled her to reach her full potential. Contemporary Early Childhood Intervention systems are widely recognised as highly effective in supporting child development and in enabling children to grow up in their families while participating in inclusive education, fostering social, emotional, and cognitive development to their fullest potential.³

EASPD has actively contributed to strengthening ECI across Europe, including leading the drafting of a [position paper on ECI](#) as well as hosting [conferences](#), and leading projects, including a European Commission-funded [technical assistance project](#) to develop a family-centred ECI framework in Greece. This was done through [training](#) and [pilot](#) of family-centred methodologies in selected services, in parallel with [research](#) on the state of play of ECI in the country, collection of [good practices](#), and information and awareness-raising for parents and professionals.

Similarly, research shows that **inclusive education** significantly improves both academic and social outcomes for children with disabilities compared with segregated settings. Benefits include higher test scores, greater engagement, stronger social skills, and the promotion of empathy and cooperation among all students, contributing to more socially cohesive school environments. Both ECI and inclusive education are central to fulfilling the UNCRPD, which guarantees the right of children with disabilities to the highest attainable standard of development and to education in an inclusive setting alongside their peers.

The **EU Child Guarantee** explicitly focuses on children with disabilities and on children living in institutions, including actions on ECI and inclusive education, as highlighted in the EASPD [analysis of the National Action Plans](#), although there is limited space for aligning vision and actions. The second phase of the European Disability Rights Strategy could play a role in supporting Member States by providing a common vision and tools to harmonising actions, bridging more effectively with the Child Guarantee, and fostering the successful implementation of national measures.

Proposed actions targeting children with disabilities:

³ https://earlybrain.eu/?page_id=440

- Develop an **EU-wide study of national ECI systems and policies and practices**, informing the development of **EU Guidelines on ECI systems for Member States and accession countries** in the form of a Council Recommendation.
- Develop an **EU-wide study of inclusive education systems, policies, and practices**.
- **Establish structured Mutual Learning processes connecting the Disability Platform and Child Guarantee Coordinators on ECI and education**, learning between Member States and stakeholders, to identify effective approaches and support national reforms in line with UNCRPD.

While Early Childhood Intervention and inclusive education are distinct policy areas, it would be valuable to adopt a **holistic approach to policies for children with disabilities**, integrating these two areas alongside other relevant measures, to provide coherent and effective support throughout childhood and ensure equal opportunities for development, learning, and social participation.

4.2 Strategy on the transition from institutions to inclusion in the community

EASPD supports the recommendation of the European Disability Forum on developing an EU Strategy on the transition from institutions to inclusion in the community, which would build on the EU Guidance on Independent Living and Inclusion in the Community.

Proposed actions for an EU Strategy on the transition from institutions to inclusion in the community:

- **Ensure that the EU and Member States systematically collect, update and make publicly available data** on the number of persons with disabilities living in institutions, on transition processes, and on the availability and quality of community-based support, in order to monitor trends and track progress over time.
- Ensure **monitoring of projects for independent living using EU funds**, so that they do not perpetuate institutional care, including the use of development funding going outside of the EU, and **embed monitoring in the European Semester**, the social OMC and the ESIF processes.
- Provide **technical support to national and local authorities** on preparing for the transition away from institutions.
- Provide **training and capacity building for service providers and local authorities** to move towards person-centred support and respect of the UNCRPD.
- Ensure and facilitate **financial support** for the “cost of transition”.
- Launch and foster **information campaigns** to persons with disabilities, and current residents of institutions, on their options and choices outside of institutional care, to attract people to become **personal assistants**, and to improve working conditions in the sector.
- Build on the [User Centred funding models for Long Term Care](#) (UNIC) project findings and [guidelines](#) to provide support to public authorities willing to pilot **direct payment systems to persons with disabilities** for their personal assistance budget.

- **Embed support to families and informal carers in disability support planning and provision**, building on the findings of the [research](#) on human-rights-based Support, Empowering Families and Informal Carers of Persons with Disabilities and on the [Turin Declaration](#).
- EASPD is part of the European Expert Group on the transition from institutional to community-based care, and joins its call about European Commission establish a permanent “**EU Knowledge Exchange in Deinstitutionalisation Practice**”, which should convene practitioners and authorities, provide hands-on technical assistance linked to EU funds (such as ESF+ and ERDF), run peer reviews, improve data, and maintain a practical knowledge hub, aligned with the European Care Strategy (2022) and the EU’s obligations under the UNCRPD Article 19 and the UNCRPD Committee’s 2022 Guidelines on DI, UNCRC, and future UN instruments on older people.
- The lack of affordable and accessible housing has is one of the key barriers to scaling up independent living.⁴ As explained in recent EASPD’s [position paper](#) and [study on housing](#), **the next phase of the Disability Strategy creates an opportunity for cross-sector collaborations with the EU Affordable Housing Plan (EAHP)**. In particular the proposed Strategy on the transition from institutions to inclusion in the community should include alignment goals with key actions of the EAHP, and structural collaboration should be established between the Disability Platform and the [European Housing Alliance](#), including the participation of Disabled People’s Organisations (DPOs) and support services.

4.3 Reinforce community-based services with a disability-specific Framework on Social Services of Excellence for persons with disabilities

EASPD has long emphasised that high-quality, person-centred, and outcomes-oriented social services are central to ensuring a meaningful impact on the lives of persons with disabilities and to translating the principles of the UNCRPD into everyday practice. Its multi-annual [strategy](#) highlights the importance of strengthening and supporting members in service transformation, recognising that enabling responsive, high-quality support systems is essential for advancing the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities. This builds on EASPD’s long-standing role in promoting innovation, knowledge exchange, and policy reform across the sector.

Recognising this, EASPD took action to contribute to the announced framework for social services of excellence, dedicating a [conference](#) to the topic, conducting a comprehensive [study](#) on innovative frameworks to measure the quality of services, and bringing together a stakeholder taskforce of national and local organisations across Europe to draft concrete [recommendations](#).

⁴ See for example : Eurofound (2024), Paths towards independent living and social inclusion in Europe, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg ; Šiška, J. and Beadle-Brown, J. (2020). Transition from Institutional Care to Community-Based Services in 27 EU Member States: Final report. Research report for the European Expert Group on Transition from Institutional to Community-based Care.

This work highlighted the critical need for common principles, robust indicators, and mechanisms that assess both the structural and process-related aspects of services, ensuring they genuinely enhance quality of life for service users.

Proposed actions for the EU Framework on Social Services of Excellence:

- **Develop a study on enabling choice, control, and quality in disability support:** Conduct a study on how support systems can be structured to **guarantee choice and control for persons with disabilities, while ensuring access to high-quality services**. The study should investigate the compatibility of disability of income, and on models where allowances and support systems are not reduced due to employment, marital status, or inheritance, including examples from EU Member States and other countries. It should also explore how these systems can empower individuals to make decisions about the type, provider, and setting of their support, linking financial support with access to **person-centred, community-based services of high quality**.
 - The **study and framework** should build on the [foundational papers and checklist](#) of the OHCHR’s Equality and Quality in Disability-Inclusive Human Support Provision (EQUIP) project.
- **The Framework should be developed as a guidance to social services** on what they should be working towards helping people achieve while working in a person-centred way, focusing on each person’s needs, preferences, and aspirations. This means that the framework needs to result in the services with comprehensive principles and indicators that any tool should include with the aim to increase the awareness of services on what quality is, while also supporting services in continuously improving.
- **Focus on outcomes and person-centred practices:** The framework should ensure that services measure their impact on the quality of life of individuals. Build on innovative models such as the Quality of Life Supports [Model](#) to establish common principles and indicators assessing both structural and process-related aspects of services. Apart of a monitoring purpose the framework in each Member State should also establish a complaint mechanism to encourage people drawing on support to reclaim their rights and change the support service they are using when not satisfied.
- **Enable legal and funding frameworks, and address workforce challenges:** The Framework should operate within supportive legal and funding environments, strengthen the workforce, and adopt a co-production approach guided by the principle of “nothing about us without us.”
- **Provide EU guidance for funding quality disability services:** Develop guidance for public authorities on how to use State aid and public procurement to support high-quality, person-centred, community-based services for persons with disabilities, aligned with the principles and indicators of the EU Framework on Social Services of Excellence. As part of this guidance, include a section on improving labour market outcomes for persons with disabilities, addressing the complexity of the rules, highlighting promising practices, and showing how socially responsible public procurement (SRPP) can foster quality, inclusive, and fair employment.

- **Pilot implementation across Member States:** Link the Framework to existing EU initiatives, such as the Voluntary Framework on Social Services of General Interest, and leverage EU funds for implementation to promote sustainability and excellence in social services.
- **Stakeholder engagement and mutual learning:** Develop a dedicated subgroup within the Disability Platform to support the Framework’s development, facilitate the exchange of promising practices, and ensure co-design with all stakeholders, including public and non-profit service providers, Disabled People’s Organisations, and family and child-rights organisations.
- **Align with the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy:** Ensure that access to high-quality, accessible, and affordable social services contributes to poverty prevention and alleviation. Integrating the Framework with the Anti-Poverty Strategy will maximise investments in service quality, workforce sustainability, and integrated support systems, turning shared principles into tangible impacts on the lives of persons with disabilities and their families. For more information, find the EASPD position [here](#).

4.4 Addressing the disability employment gap: European Disability Employment and Skills Guarantee

The Disability Employment Package was successful in identifying promising practices across Europe that facilitate employment of persons with disabilities. Within EASPD’s membership, it helped frame and shape national-level discussions on how to tackle the disability employment gap, improve job quality, and organise disability employment support effectively across Europe. Building on this momentum, EASPD is coordinating the ESF+-funded [SUPPORT](#) project, aimed at reducing long-term unemployment among persons with disabilities by scaling up and transferring innovative Supported Employment practices. Through SUPPORT, the consortium is producing country analyses, stakeholder maps, guidelines on funding mechanisms, training materials and campaign programmes for practitioners and employers and European-level recommendations.

In this context, EASPD strongly supports the European Disability Forum proposal of establishing a **European Disability Employment and Skills Guarantee**. Following the lessons learned from the Youth Guarantee, this initiative would provide targeted support and earmarked funds to Member States, ensuring access to education, training, and employment opportunities for persons with disabilities. To be effective, the EU must make the necessary provisions in the upcoming **Multiannual Financial Framework** to secure adequate funding.

As part of the Guarantee, EASPD supports several key principles proposed by the EDF:

- The **age restriction should be lifted**, as barriers to the open labour market are experienced throughout a person’s life.

- **Extra resources** should be provided through the Guarantee to fund reasonable accommodation at work, especially since in most EU Member States, such support is only subsidised for employees with permanent contracts.
- The Guarantee should be **accessible to people receiving disability allowance**, allowing them to retain their benefits while in work, training, or education, and ensuring that being a recipient of disability allowance does not prevent someone from being considered a NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training).

EASPD also identifies several key components for the Guarantee:

- **EU-wide study and mutual learning initiatives** to examine policy environments and practices behind successful disability employment support systems. This should cover equal labour rights and wages, subsidies (including wage compensation and support packages), reasonable accommodations, procurement systems, supported employment, and transitions from sheltered to open labour markets. Findings would guide national-level policy discussions and support Member States in adopting more effective and sustainable disability employment support systems employment strategies.
- **Development of a Guidance note to promote supported employment**, drawing on lessons from the Disability Employment Package and the Guarantee, providing practical tools for policymakers, service providers, and other stakeholders across Europe.
- Ensure the **Disability Employment Package delivers real impact** by reinforcing implementation through coordinated awareness-raising, capacity-building and exchange of good practices among Member States, employers, social partners, service providers, and DPOs.
- **As a part of the EU guidance for funding quality disability services**, include a section on how to use **public procurement and State aid** to support Member States in improving labour market outcomes for persons with disabilities. The guidance should address the current [complexity of the rules and their limited uptake](#), highlight [promising practices](#), and demonstrate how socially responsible public procurement can foster quality, inclusive, and fair employment. This should be undertaken following the finalisation of the planned revisions to both regulations, ensuring that Member States can fully benefit from the updated frameworks.
- Develop a **subgroup of the Disability Platform** to support the development of this initiative and to exchange promising practices.
- To maximise impact, the Strategy actions in the field of employment and skills should be closely aligned with the **Union of Skills Strategy**, ensuring access to inclusive education, upskilling, and lifelong learning opportunities for persons with disabilities. This will support both their employability and the development of a skilled, sustainable social services workforce, as highlighted in the [EASPD position](#). At the same time, the forthcoming **Quality Jobs Act**, part of the **Quality Jobs Roadmap**, should be leveraged, as highlighted in the [EASPD Position](#), to promote sustainable, inclusive, and well-remunerated employment, particularly in care and support sectors, thereby reinforcing the link between service quality and meaningful employment. Together, these strategies create a coherent, mutually reinforcing ecosystem where social services excellence, skills development, and quality

employment converge to promote inclusion, independence, and economic security for persons with disabilities.

5. Equal Access and Non-Discrimination

5.1 Legal Capacity and Supported Decision Making

Member States across the EU are aligning, or seeking to align, their legal capacity policies with the UNCRPD, with some countries making significant legislative progress (e.g. Spain, Ireland, Cyprus) as highlighted in EASPD's [collection of promising practices](#). This represents a positive trend that should be actively encouraged. However, even where policy is strong, meaningful change requires shifts in mindset and the development of new skills, particularly in the area of Supported Decision-Making. The EU is well-positioned to build on existing developments at national and local levels, ensuring that lessons learned are shared and scaled across Member States.

Key proposed actions include:

- **EU-wide study on legal capacity reforms:** Analyse how reforms have overcome common challenges and identify effective approaches to facilitate uptake, including good practices in Supported Decision-Making.
- **Guidance and recommendations:** Develop EU-level guidance on legal capacity and Supported Decision-Making, alongside recommendations for Member States to improve access to justice.
- **Disability Platform subgroup:** Establish a dedicated subgroup to support the development of this initiative and promote the exchange of promising practices across Member States.

5.2 Revive the EU Anti-Discrimination Directive as a tool to protect disability rights

The Horizontal Anti-Discrimination Directive, which would extend protection against discrimination on the grounds of disability beyond employment to areas such as social protection, healthcare, education, and access to goods and services, has been stalled in the Council for over 17 years. While the first phase of the European Disability Rights Strategy included an action to enable the adoption of this proposal and to support cooperation between the EU and national UNCRPD frameworks, the delay means that people with disabilities remain protected in the workplace but not consistently in other essential areas of life. This gap contradicts the EU's commitment to the UNCRPD, which requires comprehensive protection against discrimination in all spheres.

EASPD urges the Commission to renew its prioritisation of this long-awaited directive in the second phase of the Strategy. Adoption and enforcement are critical to ensure that people with disabilities can fully exercise their rights across society. Without it, legal discrimination in healthcare, education, housing, and public services will persist, undermining both human dignity and the EU's equality commitments. The Commission should work constructively with Member States to secure adoption, exploring all available mechanisms,

including enhanced cooperation if unanimity remains unattainable. Seventeen years is far too long for people with disabilities to wait for equal protection under the law.

5.3 Access to Arts, Culture and Sport

Access to culture, sport, and leisure is a fundamental right under Article 30 of the UNCRPD, yet many persons with disabilities in Europe still face barriers to participation. Inclusive cultural and leisure opportunities are most effective when mainstream and disability-specific services collaborate, sharing expertise, resources, and responsibilities. To explore these issues and gather concrete recommendations, **EASPD organised the conference “A Culture of Inclusion: Enriching Lives Through Arts, Sports and Leisure”**, bringing together experts, service providers, and stakeholders from across Europe. The conference highlighted the importance of sustainable funding, professional pathways for disabled artists and athletes, inclusive leisure from early childhood, and the role of assistive technology in supporting participation. It also emphasised that several initiatives from the previous phase of the EU Disability Rights Strategy, including full implementation of inclusion measures, have **not yet been realised**, leaving gaps in practice that must now be addressed.

To build inclusive cultural and leisure ecosystems, EASPD recommends the following targeted actions:

- **Establish sustainable, multi-annual funding** for disability inclusion in culture, arts, and sport. The Commission should **reinforce Creative Europe, Erasmus+, and ESF+ funding** to support inclusive partnerships between mainstream and disability organisations, finance adaptive equipment and assistive technology, and ensure long-term, cross-border initiatives are possible.
- Foster the Member States’ **mainstreaming of disability inclusion into national cultural and sports strategies**. Member States should be urged to **embed clear inclusion targets and coordination mechanisms across relevant ministries**, aligning national policies with the EU Disability Rights Strategy and ensuring that persons with disabilities can access, participate in, and pursue professional pathways in arts, culture, and sport.

These recommendations aim to combine **EU-level leadership with national implementation**, ensuring that persons with disabilities not only have access to cultural and leisure opportunities but can fully participate and thrive as creators, performers, and athletes across Europe.

6. Efficiently delivering the Strategy

The European Commission has a wide range of tools to help deliver the Strategy and make progress on the ground. In particular, it can identify and share progress achieved across Europe to inform and shape the necessary policy reforms to deliver on the UNCRPD.

Disability cannot be treated as a standalone issue. People with disabilities are workers, parents, students, tenants and citizens. Their rights and needs must be reflected in every major social and economic initiative the

EU pursues. A key component of the second phase must thus be the **systematic mainstreaming of disability rights across all relevant EU initiatives**. This includes ensuring disability is embedded in the Union of Skills, the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, the Equality and Jobs Roadmap, the Child Guarantee, and the Affordable Housing Plan.

The Commission has several instruments to support the uptake of disability rights initiatives, such as EU funding programmes, which need to be clearly defined to ensure that Member States can make use of them:

- **Upskilling and reskilling the workforce in social services** is crucial to reach the objectives of the Strategy. The Erasmus+ funding programme can be used to support this.
- **EU funds**, including European Social Fund+, the European Regional Development Fund, and the Technical Support Instrument, can be used by managing authorities to **support the implementation of the Strategy**. This should be maintained in the new EU budget.
- It is not only important to have enough funds but also to know how these funds can be used. **Reliable and systematic monitoring mechanisms** are needed, but also practical examples, opportunities to exchange knowledge and promising practices through Mutual Learning Activities.
- A **dissemination and exploitation strategy** from the European Commission can support increasing awareness of initiatives among Member States and other relevant stakeholders.
- Setting up **coordination agencies within relevant Ministries** can encourage cooperation between Ministries and between central and local authorities, supporting and promoting the uptake of initiatives whilst ensuring the provision of high-quality services nationally.
- The European Commission should continue to make the most of **Disabled People's Organisations** as well as of **European disability and support service providers' networks** as sources for policy inputs and tools to help disseminate good practices. These networks, including EASPD and its members, have direct access to frontline realities and can bridge the gap between policy development and practical implementation.

This is a policy paper of the European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD). 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 over 50 different countries, we promote human rights and equal opportunities for people with disabilities through effective and high-quality support.

Our work focuses on key areas essential to quality support provision. This includes Employment, Education and notably Vocational Education & Training, Adult Learning and skills development, Early Childhood Intervention, Inclusive Living, Person-Centred Technology, Workforce Development and Human Resources, Arts, Culture & Sport, and Policy Impact.

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