

Live-in carers face precarious conditions despite shortage of care workers in EU labour market

The EESC goes local to gain a first-hand insight into Europe's live-in care work sector

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) held the first of its “going-local” meetings about the future of live-in care work in Europe in London on Wednesday, in a bid to conduct further research into the labour conditions of these workers and shine a spotlight on their precarious situation in labour markets.

Aside from **the United Kingdom**, the EESC will also hold “going-local” meetings in **Germany, Sweden, Italy and Poland**, representing some of the countries of origin and destination of live-in care workers.

The country visits are a follow-up to the EESC's [own-initiative opinion](#) on the rights of live-in care workers, adopted in September 2016 as the **first policy document at European Union level dealing with the sector of live-in care work in Europe**, which has long remained almost invisible to EU and Member State policy makers.

Due to a lack of data, the exact number of live-in care workers is unknown, as is their contribution to the British economy and the economies of other Member States, the participants at the meeting in London confirmed.

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), domestic work represented 5-9% of all employment in industrialised countries in 2012. In an ageing Europe plagued by labour shortages in the care sector and a lack of adequate infrastructure for long-term care provision, the number of live-in care workers is expected to grow.

They are among the most mobile parts of the workforce in the EU, with Eastern Europe still supplying many such workers to other EU countries.

However, their employment status is often unregulated, their work undeclared or they find themselves in bogus self-employment and often work in very difficult conditions.

“Care work is highly demanding, both physically and emotionally. The conditions these people work in may resemble modern slavery as they have to be on standby 24/7, and are not free to move like other workers”, said Member of the European Parliament **Mary Honeyball**.

At the same time, care recipients and their families have no guarantee they will receive quality care as they often recruit care workers through informal networks of family or friends or via the internet.

The EESC is, among other things, proposing that the existence of live-in care workers in the EU labour market be recognised by providing a common occupational definition of their profession as well as their inclusion into the long-term care system, with all the rights arising from relevant EU and Member State employment regulations.

“These workers should have rights to proper remuneration, health and safety protection, social security and the right to freedom of association and collective bargaining,” said the rapporteur of the EESC opinion **Adam Rogalewski** (EESC Workers’ Group).

Furthermore, Member States should provide financial and organisational support for care recipients, who often are not aware that by hiring a live-in care worker, they become real employers, with their fair share of responsibility.

Referring to the situation in the UK, **Mr Rogalewski** said: “We have noticed that the social care sector in the UK has been severely impacted by funding cuts of £6 billion since 2010. These impacts have severely degraded the availability and quality of care. Labour shortages as a result of low pay and poor conditions in the sector have led to a surge in informal care arrangements. Civil society across Europe and especially in the UK has been calling for a reversal of the logic of austerity. There is an urgent need for greater investment into the care sector.”

As for regulation of the sector – which is currently highly fragmented, with lots of agencies offering live-in care workers under conditions that amount to social dumping – opinions diverged. A member of the EESC delegation, **John Walker** (EESC Employers’ Group), warned against any overregulation of this sector because this would increase the costs to the taxpayer. As for **Marina Yannakoudakis** (EESC Various Interests Group), she struck a note of warning about the shadow economy in this sector and defended the professionalisation of the live-in care workers, as well as advocating measures to support their employers, such as tax relief.

Background

The EESC opinion adopted last year presented eight recommendations for Member States and 12 recommendations for EU legislators to improve the overall capacity of the sector to create quality jobs and deliver quality care. They include implementing processes for recognising qualifications and experience acquired by live-in care workers, improving the way they are posted and incorporating their rights into the European semester. A rigorous application of the Victims’ Rights Directive in case of workers who are victims of exploitation, and the improvement of safeguards in the Employers’ Sanctions Directive to protect labour rights of undocumented workers should also be high on the agenda. Collection of adequate data on live-in care workers as well as carrying out research into their working and living conditions is also needed.

The findings of the EESC country visits will be presented in a report which will be published later in 2018.