This flagship report brings together in-depth contributions in the area of quality of society and public services, based mainly on research carried out since 2016. Recognising the fact that the quality of people’s lives is profoundly influenced by their access to quality provision in areas such as education, health, housing and social services, the report pays particular attention to regional and social inequalities and, where possible, changes over time.

The starting point is the European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS) which has, since its inception in 2003, included questions on various aspects of quality of society, notably societal tensions, social capital, institutional trust, and the quality of services that are key for the well-being of the public. The EQLS provides representative data for the adult population in each of the 28 EU Member States. Other comparative European surveys are also analysed and case studies are presented to illustrate policies and measures to improve the quality of services and quality of life. While the contributions examine provision to the general population, there is an emphasis on services aimed at meeting the needs of people with health, social or care problems. There is also a focus on younger people, including, for example, childcare services, schools, social services to meet the needs of teenagers and young adults, and services for the integration of refugees.

Overall, the report reveals positive developments in many fields, but also emphasises the continuing inequalities between countries and different social groups. There are notable gaps in provision of services, as well as diverse barriers to effective access. While the results present an uneven picture regarding service quality, they also give indications of how to offer more satisfactory support. The underlying message is that improving delivery of quality public services is fundamental to attaining the objectives of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

**Progress**
- **Some positives on social cohesion:** Trust in people remains largely stable and overall trust in institutions at EU level has recovered, alongside a decline in perceived social exclusion.
- **High visibility for public services:** Public services are recognised as a cornerstone of the European Pillar of Social Rights, with a particular focus on promoting access to quality services for all.
- **Improvements in quality:** Assessments of the quality of public services (particularly health care and childcare) have improved, particularly in countries where quality ratings were previously low.
- **Public services positively linked to trust:** Perceived quality of public services is a key driver for higher trust in institutions, pointing to the value of public participation in the co-design of services.
- **Active citizenship and civic engagement:** High levels of both reflect positive benefits, with great potential for further investment in this area to boost trust and cohesion.
- **Online services increasingly operational:** Growth of digital benefits are apparent in many areas – likely to be ongoing especially for young people and to improve access for hard-to-reach groups.
- **High potential for e-healthcare:** Most Member States have much potential to expand the use of e-healthcare, but this is a matter of staff training and incentives as well as ICT systems.
Challenges

- **Trust**: While levels of trust and social cohesion have recovered in the EU as a whole since the period of financial crisis, in nearly half of all Member States the average trust in national institutions was lower in 2016 than before the crisis.
- **Societal tensions**: Perceptions of tensions – between ethnic or racial groups, and between religious groups – was more common in 2016 than before the crisis, with a significantly negative impact on trust in institutions.
- **Social inclusion**: Rates of loneliness, poor mental health and social exclusion are particularly high for older people in central and eastern Europe – in part due to poorly developed care services.
- **Health care**: While satisfaction with different aspects of health care has improved, many people were dissatisfied with being informed and consulted about their care – and this proportion was higher among people with low income.
- **Digital impact**: The spread and uptake of digital technologies appears slow in health services and particularly in social services, with large differences between Member States.
- **Childcare**: Cost is a greater barrier – on average across the EU – in availing of childcare services than lack of places, distance or opening hours.
- **Young people**: There are strong indications of increased risk of mental health problems among those aged 12–24 years, with many hard groups to reach, such as persons with chronic health problems, living in rural areas and not in education or employment.
- **Integration of migrants**: Recent cuts to services for refugees in several Member States have had negative impacts on their sustainability and maintaining availability and quality.
- **Insecurities**: Perceived insecurities related to income, accommodation, and employment are increasingly recognised and often widespread, with negative impacts on well-being and on trust.

What next?

- **More comparative EU-wide information** needs to be obtained on groups in society with evident needs – such as teenagers, migrants, and people living in institutions.
- **Improved recruitment and training policies** are urgently required in some public services: for example, long-term care, where there are also difficulties in retaining staff (in part due to poor pay and working conditions.)
- **More attention must be given** to the growing feelings of unfairness (between countries, regions and groups), particularly with respect to access to quality public services.
- **Prompt and better access is required** to primary health care, social care and long-term care to trigger early intervention, monitor ongoing needs and prevent escalation of problems.
- **More guidance is needed** on how to blend formal services and informal care (family and friends) effectively.
- **More and better opportunities** are needed for older people to contribute beyond paid work – as well as better quality housing and local environments to enable sustained living in the community.
- **Public investment** should be directed at long-term care services, as well as at improvements in home care and help in Member States (almost half) with the lowest income.
- **Better monitoring** of mental health issues and providing psychological support is needed for refugees and asylum seekers, to speed up their integration into the community.
- **More collaborative and coordinated approaches** should be put in place to ensure optimal migrant integration, with specific female-focused initiatives prioritised to address the higher inflows of female refugees.
- **The established role of local and regional authorities** can be used to address regional inequalities in the provision of public services and to drive the digitalisation of social services.