The EU Anti-Poverty Strategy: what it means for Supported Employment

What the Strategy says, why it matters for ASEE members, and how to use it in national advocacy and in the 2028–2034 EU budget debate

1. What is the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy?

On **6 May 2026,** the European Commission adopted the **first-ever EU Anti-Poverty Strategy**, with the ambition to help **eradicate poverty in the EU by 2050**. It is a European Commission Communication (COM(2026) 538), published with two supporting staff working documents, a Communication on strengthening the European Child Guarantee and a proposal for a Council Recommendation on fighting housing exclusion.

Why now?

About **1 in 5 people in the EU (20.9% in 2025, roughly 93 million)** are at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE: low income, severe material and social deprivation, or very low work intensity in the household) and one child in four is affected. The EU's 2030 target is to reduce this number by at least 15 million compared with 2019, including 5 million children. By 2025 the fall was 3.5 million, and the figure for children had barely moved. Rising food, energy and housing costs are also pushing middle-income households towards hardship.

What it contains

- **Chapter 1, the life course:** measures for children, young people, people of working age and older people.
- **Chapter 2, horizontal challenges:** discrimination and stigma, cost of living and housing, and access to services.
- **Chapter 3, governance, funding and monitoring.**

Its central idea is **active inclusion**: support to enter work for those who can work, adequate income support, and access to essential services. A quality job is called "the first and best tool" to prevent poverty, but the Strategy is clear that **poverty is multidimensional** and employment policy alone cannot solve it.

Why it is politically significant

Poverty for the first time now has its own European Union wide strategy, with a long-term horizon. The European Commission asks each EU country (Member States) to have a anti-poverty framework (only 22 Member States have one today), to appoint a high-level **Anti-Poverty Coordinator**, and to "poverty-proof" new investments and reforms. New EU poverty indicators are due by 2028 and some NGOs argue this strategy is insufficient because it is not attached to new European funding or legally constraining measures for Member States (see SOLIDAR). That's why expectations attached to this new European Strategy should stay realistic.

How it fits with other recent EU initiatives

- **Quality Jobs Roadmap (December 2025) and Quality Jobs Act:** a proposal for the Act is expected in December 2026. It centers on conditions for people already at work.
- **European Pillar of Social Rights (22 July 2026):** reviews the 2021 plan and launched the activation consultation described in section 4.
- **Strengthened Disability Strategy and Disability Employment Package (May 2026):** the Strategy relies on these for persons with disabilities.
- **2028–2034 EU budget (MFF):** under negotiation; see section 5.

2. Why is it relevant to Supported Employment?

The Strategy **does not explicitly refer to Supported Employment**. It refers to individualised approaches, social economy, and a strengthened Disability Employment Package. The link is one ASEE and its members must make, and it is a strong one:

- **Quality work is the route out of poverty.** In 2025, 66% of unemployed people and 44% of people outside the labour market were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. It is important to notice that the **two groups differ.** *Unemployed* people have no job but are looking for one and available to start. People *outside the labour market* (inactive) are neither working nor looking for work, for example because of disability, health problems, caring duties or discouragement. Many people with significant barriers are in this second group, so unemployment figures alone hide their situation. For persons with disabilities, the rate is 29%. Other disadvantaged groups also face high rates: 39% for people born outside the EU and 70% for Roma. The Strategy lists persons with disabilities among groups needing dedicated efforts to enter work.
- **Individualised, ongoing support.** The Strategy says helping the most vulnerable into sustained quality jobs "requires an individualised approach". A planned EU initiative on activation would support outreach to people excluded from the labour market and "individualised pathways" into work. Profiling, job matching, employer engagement and in-work support by a job coach is exactly that, and it is long-term, not a short activation scheme.
- **Preventing in-work poverty.** 8.3% of workers are still at risk of poverty, and about twice that share among part-time (12.9%) and temporary (13.4%) workers. Therefore, a job does not protect from poverty if the pay is low, the hours are few, or the contract is insecure. So, for the jobs that members help people into, four things matter: pay, hours, type of contract, and how benefits are reduced as earnings rise. On the matter, the Commission will issue a Recommendation on in-work poverty in 2027, which has a non-legally binding nature.
- **Integrated support.** Work does not stand alone. The Strategy points to housing, transport, health, care and social protection, and plans a 2027 Council Recommendation on **easier, integrated access to services** (a single access point, rapid needs assessment, an integrated support plan). Job coaches often see these barriers first. This is in line with the fifth stage of SE, **on- and off-the-job support**: the job coach supports the person at work (tasks, adjustments, colleagues) and outside work (transport, housing, benefits, health services) for as long as needed, so the person keeps the job and progresses.
- **Choice and participation.** The Commission will create a forum where people experiencing poverty are consulted regularly. This fits SE's principles of empowerment, choice, and control.
- **Employers and the social economy.** The Strategy promises continued EU support for the social economy and microfinance, including an assessment of public financial support for social economy actors. It also plans a Coalition Against Poverty of businesses and philanthropic organisations, whose members are asked to make pledges, for example, to support the employment of specific groups. For SE providers, this is a possible door to employer partnerships which is in line with the SE approach to employers: SE is a partnership with both the people who access employment and the employers, and the employer is a customer in its own right.

Illustration (hypothetical): A job coach helps a young adult with intellectual disability into a 20-hour contract. Whether this lifts the person out of poverty depends on the wage, the hours, how the disability benefit is reduced, and whether transport and housing are secure. The Strategy's multidimensional logic is the argument for funding the coaching **and** the coordination around it.

A point to handle with care. The Strategy separates people "who can work" from those "who cannot work, either structurally or because they are currently facing specific barriers". SE's principle of zero rejection, with no work-readiness test, means members should argue that this line should not be drawn before the right support has been tried.

What the Strategy says	What ASEE can argue
An EU initiative on activation would support outreach to people excluded from the labour market and individualised pathways into work.	Activation should include long-term, employer-facing support after the job starts, which is what supported employment provides.
Individualised support and outreach are needed to bring excluded people into quality jobs.	Supported employment is the evidence-based, long-term form of individualised support, with a job coach for employees and employers.
Persons with disabilities will be supported through a strengthened Disability Employment Package.	That package should name supported employment, in line with the EU Guidelines on Supported Employment.
Services should be integrated with one access point and a support plan.	Job coaching should be part of that plan, with employment, disability, and social services working together.

Key takeaway: Supported employment is part of a broader strategy for inclusion and poverty prevention, not just an activation measure. The Strategy gives the framing; members must supply the link.

3. How does it relate to the European Pillar of Social Rights?

The **European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR)** was proclaimed in 2017 by the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission. It is a document setting out **20 principles** in three areas: equal opportunities and access to the labour market; fair working conditions; and social protection and inclusion. A **2021 Action Plan** set three 2030 targets: 78% of adults in employment, 60% in training each year, and **at least 15 million fewer people at risk of poverty or social exclusion**. On 22 July 2026, the European Commission published a Communication on the Pillar with a review of the 2021 plan. The Anti-Poverty Strategy builds on the Pillar and turns its poverty goal into a more coordinated approach. Therefore, the Principles that are the most relevant for ASEE's Members:

EPSR principle	In short	Why it matters for SE
3 Equal opportunities	Equal treatment and opportunities, regardless of disability.	Basis for non-discrimination in hiring and in access to support.
4 Active support to employment	Right to timely, tailor-made help to find work.	The "tailor-made" wording matches individual job coaching.
5 Secure and adaptable employment	Fair treatment and access to protection whatever the contract type.	Supports decent contracts and progression, not only a first job.
6 Wages	Fair wages for a decent standard of living; in-work poverty prevented.	Links directly to in-work poverty and the "real job at going wage" principle.
14 Minimum income	Adequate income support, combined with incentives to work for those who can.	Benefit design should let people keep support while earning.
17 Inclusion of persons with disabilities	Income support, services and a work environment adapted to their needs.	The core Pillar basis for supported employment.

4. Is the Strategy legally binding?

No. It is a Commission Communication: **a statement of policy direction that does not create enforceable rights or obligations** for Member States or service providers. When it "calls on" Member States to adopt strategies or appoint a Coordinator, that is an invitation, **not a requirement**.

This does not make it empty. In practice it:

- gives a **common political framework** for EU and national anti-poverty policy;
- **signals future EU action**: several follow-up measures are already announced (see table below);
- is a **reference point for advocacy** towards ministries and EU institutions, and a policy argument for investing in approaches that work;
- feeds the **European Semester**, where more than a third of Member States received a poverty-related recommendation in each of the last two cycles;
- shapes the **priorities of EU funding** (section 5).

Some follow-ups carry more weight than a Communication. A Council Recommendation is agreed by Member States, and the Minimum Wage Directive is binding law whose enforcement the Commission will step up in the near future.

The most significant is the **activation initiative**. On 22 July 2026 the Commission launched the first-phase consultation of EU social partners under Article 154 TFEU on possible EU action on activation. It closed on 15 October, and press reports say a second phase should start by the end of 2026. The consultation document says a binding instrument, possibly a directive, could be considered, and the Commission's factsheet calls it a consultation "on legal action to remove barriers to employment". No proposal exists yet, and Member States have stressed national competences. Only EU-level social partners answer these consultations formally, so ASEE and its members can influence it indirectly, through national employers and trade union organisations and allied EU networks. Moreover, the European Commission's Executive Vice-President for Social Rights and Skills, Quality Jobs and Preparedness Roxana Mînzatu has said the aim is "not to push people into any job", which supports the case for long-term, individualised support.

When	Announced initiative	Why watch it
22 July 2026	First-phase consultation of EU social partners on activation (closed 15 October; second phase expected by end-2026)	Possible directive; hook for outreach and individualised pathways
2027	Commission Recommendation on in-work poverty	Pay, hours, benefit taper
2027	Proposal for a Council Recommendation on integrated access to services	Single access point, support plans
2027	European Care Deal; compendium on non-take-up of benefits	Care, benefit access
2028	New EU poverty indicators	What gets measured, and rewarded

5. What does it mean for EU funding and the next MFF?

The **Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)** is the EU's long-term budget. It sets spending ceilings and priorities for seven years; the next one covers **2028–2034**. Strategies do not hold money, but they build the political case for where money goes. The European anti-poverty strategy says sufficient funding is essential, and that supporting people excluded from the labour market "requires strong and well-funded public employment services". It **does not guarantee funding for supported employment**: what reaches members depends on the final MFF, the programme rules, national programming and calls.

Where the MFF stands (24 November 2026)

Everything below is **proposed, not adopted**. The Commission's July 2025 proposal folds cohesion, agriculture and the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) into one national and regional plan per Member State, with **at least 14% for social objectives**. The Strategy lists the four social measures to be funded: **social inclusion; food or basic material assistance; child poverty and the Child Guarantee; youth unemployment and the Youth Guarantee.** Supported employment is not named, so its natural home is "social inclusion", which makes naming it in national plans essential. The European Parliament wants a stand-alone ESF+ with its own budget; the Council has only partial positions. Recently, on the 21st of November, European Council President António Costa tabled a compromise "negotiating box": a budget about 10% smaller than the Commission's proposal (204 billion EUR less) that keeps the single national and regional plans and the 14% social target. Leaders will discuss it on 26–27 November; nothing is agreed. The 14% target is one broad figure, so supported employment risks losing visibility. Our members' brief on the EU Guidelines on Supported Employment sets out the six advocacy asks for national and regional plans; the Strategy adds the anti-poverty argument to them.

Funding streams mentioned in the Strategy

Instrument	What the Strategy says	Relevance for members
ESF+ (2021–2027)	About EUR 139 billion in use; the Commission will help Member States redirect funds to anti-poverty measures.	Main source for employment and inclusion services, usually via national or regional managing authorities. Ask whether current programmes can fund SE.
EaSI strand of ESF+, InvestEU	Microfinance and social enterprise finance continue; a 2026 call targets under-represented entrepreneurs.	Relevant to social enterprises and self-employment routes.
ERDF, Just Transition Fund, Technical Support Instrument	Listed as supporting anti-poverty action.	Regional and local opportunities; check national programmes.
Recovery and Resilience Facility	Measures had to be completed by 31 August 2026.	No longer a future source; check what your national plan is funded.
EIB, Council of Europe Development Bank	EIB aims at about EUR 22 billion of social infrastructure in 2026–27.	Mostly infrastructure; less direct for services.

Questions to put to your ministry or managing authority

- Is supported employment named in the current ESF+ programme, and can reprogram or unused funds go to it?
- Who is drafting the 2028–2034 national and regional plan, and when will stakeholders be consulted?
- Will the plan's reform commitments include legal recognition and multi-year funding for supported employment?
- How will benefit rules let people keep income support while they earn, in line with the 2027 in-work poverty Recommendation?

Key takeaway: The EU anti-poverty Strategy is an argument, not an allocation. But it can be used to press for supported employment to be named and funded in the next plans, and to use existing ESF+ better now.

6. What can ASEE members do?

1. **Cite the Strategy** in meetings with ministries of employment, social affairs and poverty reduction. Ask whether your country has an anti-poverty strategy and who is, or will be, the Anti-Poverty Coordinator.
2. **Check where supported employment appears.** Use the Commission's Principles for effective anti-poverty policies as a checklist and ask for supported employment to be recognised in national strategies and action plans.
3. **Build alliances** with anti-poverty, disability and social protection organisations, and agree with common messages, especially on in-work poverty and integrated services.
4. **Strengthen funding applications** by linking your project to the Strategy's priorities: individualised support, quality jobs, integrated services.
5. **Tell ASEE** what you find nationally, so we can follow the 2026–2028 initiatives together and influence implementation and the design of the next funding programmes.

A simple timeline

When	What members can do
Now to end 2026	Talk to your national employer and trade union organisations about the activation consultation. Map your national anti-poverty strategy, Anti-Poverty Coordinator and ESF+ programme.
2027	Feed into the Recommendations on in-work poverty and integrated access to services, and the compendium on non-take-up of benefits. Follow how your national plan is drafted.
2027–2028	As the MFF and national plans are finalised, press for supported employment to be named, multi-year funded and measured. New EU poverty indicators are due in 2028.

Checklist for meetings with policymakers

- Did we present the Strategy as a political framework, not binding law?
- Do we bring one national figure and one concrete example?
- Is our ask specific: a measure, an amount, a responsible body or an indicator?
- Have we asked for supported employment to be named in the strategy or plan?
- Who else supports this message, and what is the follow-up date?

In short: The Strategy opens a political opportunity to have supported employment recognised as an effective approach to inclusive employment and poverty prevention. It will not do so by itself.

Glossary

AROPE: at risk of poverty or social exclusion. **EPSR:** European Pillar of Social Rights. **ESF+:** European Social Fund Plus, the main EU social funding instrument. **MFF:** Multiannual Financial Framework, the EU's long-term budget. **NRPP:** National and Regional Partnership Plan, the proposed single plan per Member State. **PES:** public employment services. **SE:** supported employment.

Key sources

- Commission: EU Anti-Poverty Strategy page (Communication, staff working documents, Child Guarantee, factsheet)
- Communication COM(2026) 538 final, 6 May 2026 and Staff Working Document SWD(2026) 770, poverty trends
- Commission factsheet "Eradicating poverty in the EU", May 2026; Commission news, 6 May 2026
- European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan and Communication of 22 July 2026
- Council: MFF 2028–2034 timeline; Bocconi IEP: The Social Pillar in the Next MFF; European Parliament interim report on the MFF
- Commission consultation document C(2026) 8200, 22 July 2026; COFACE summary of the activation consultation
- EPR: analysis of the Strategy; SOLIDAR: reaction to the Strategy