MEASURING WHAT MATTERS

A European agenda for better social service evaluation

The BENEFITS project is developing innovative tools and methodologies to better understand and measure the social, economic, and environmental value of social services.

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ABOUT THIS FIRST POLICY BRIEF

This is the first in a series of BENEFITS policy briefs designed to inform and support the development of effective, evidence-based social policies across Europe. The brief is intended for European policymakers, national ministries and competent authorities, managing and funding authorities, and regional and local bodies responsible for commissioning, financing, regulating, or evaluating social services.

The policy problem

Social services play a vital role in our communities. They support people to find and remain in employment, equip them with vital skills and training, deliver mental health and social care support, and ensure that disadvantaged groups can take part fully in the community. [12]

Demand for social services is growing across Europe, along with calls to make them more affordable, accessible and higher in quality. Yet there are still too few tools, at EU or national level, to support evidence-based decisions. This makes it hard to evaluate investment in social services, align services with community needs and recognise their contribution to more prosperous communities. [1, 12]

A BENEFITS review of 66 frameworks that measure wellbeing beyond GDP confirms this gap: care, coordination and prevention are among the least measured areas.

Why this matters now

The European Care Strategy and national reforms in community care, disability support, poverty reduction and integrated care already emphasise quality and person-centred support. Their design, funding and implementation depend on adequate evaluation capacity. Expenditure and activity counts alone do not show whether services are coordinated, preventive, equitable, delivered with dignity or producing lasting improvements in people's lives. [1–8].

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The central finding: uneven coverage of social services

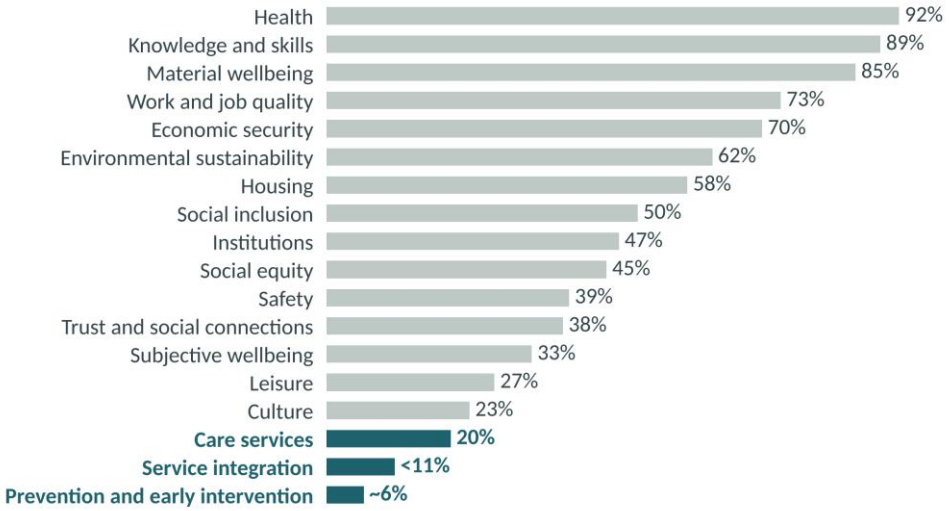

Figure 1. Coverage of selected domains across 66 Beyond-GDP frameworks. Bars show the percentage of reviewed frameworks that include each domain. Teal bars highlight care services, service integration, and prevention and early intervention. Percentages indicate inclusion, not measurement quality or national service performance.
Source: BENEFITS (2025), Deliverable D1.1 – Meta-Analysis of Existing Indicators, Sections 3.7–3.10.

KEY MESSAGE

Without measures of care, coordination and prevention, it is hard to know whether social service reforms are working.

What the 66 frameworks reveal

Beyond-GDP frameworks measure wellbeing and progress beyond economic output. The review started from 213 candidates and kept 66 that were relevant, well documented, covered several areas of life and were still in use. They were developed by public bodies, researchers, civil society and businesses at global, national and regional level. Each was mapped against 22 domains and examined for its data sources, update frequency, aggregation and attention to equity. Annex II of the review lists all 66. [1]

213	66	22	1972–2023
candidates screened	frameworks reviewed	domains mapped	introduction dates

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Four findings for social service evaluation

1

Care is included less often

Care services appear in 20% of frameworks. Even frameworks with broad coverage of wellbeing often leave care out. [1]

2

Coordination is rarely measured

Service integration appears in under 11%. Few frameworks ask whether support is continuous and coordinated when people rely on several services or providers. [1]

3

Prevention is rarely measured

Prevention appears in about 6%. When prevention works, nothing happens, so spending and activity figures cannot show its value. [1]

4

Equity analysis and timeliness remain limited

56% of frameworks allow results to be broken down by gender, but only 12% can show how disadvantages combine. Results take a median of 18 months to publish, which is too slow for fast-changing needs. [1]

What this tells us about measurement

The domains fall into four groups that usually appear together: economic foundations, social wellbeing, environmental sustainability, and governance and institutions. Care, subjective wellbeing, culture and leisure sit largely outside these groups, so they need to be added deliberately when measures are designed. [1]

52%	89%	62%
use composite indices	**use administrative data**	**use survey data**
An overall score can hide differences between components.	Routine records may miss dignity, autonomy and experience.	Surveys can capture experiences absent from routine records.

Source: BENEFITS meta-analysis, Sections 3.5 and 3.12–3.16. A framework can use more than one data source. [1]

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Relevance to European and national reforms

The examples below link the review's findings to EU policy and the seven partner countries. They raise questions for evaluation without assessing national systems.

POLICY CONTEXT	CURRENT DIRECTION	RELEVANCE OF THE 66-FRAMEWORK FINDINGS
EU	European Care Strategy and long-term-care monitoring emphasise affordable, accessible, high-quality care.	The findings point to the need for stronger measures of care, prevention, coordination and lived experience, alongside more timely evidence between official releases.
Sweden	The Social Services Act in force from July 2025 emphasises preventive, accessible and knowledge-based social services.	Prevention appears in only 6% of the reviewed frameworks. The findings suggest that implementation monitoring could give greater attention to preventive effects and service take-up.
Greece	The National Strategy for Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction operates with a national monitoring and evaluation mechanism.	Only 12% of the reviewed frameworks support intersectional analysis. The findings highlight the value of examining both differences in outcomes across population groups and gaps between the support people are entitled to and the support they can actually access.
Spain	The 2024-2030 community-care strategy promotes deinstitutionalisation, personalised support and support at home and in the community.	Care and service integration are underrepresented in existing frameworks. Monitoring needs therefore to cover autonomy, continuity and coordination across services.
Italy	The National Plan for Social Interventions and Services 2024-2026 supports regional/local provision and implementation of LEPS.	A small common set of measures could improve comparability of quality and outcomes while allowing regions to retain their own approaches.
Austria	The National Action Plan on Disability 2022-2030 combines objectives, indicators and measures across a federal system.	Policy indicators could be complemented with measures of lived experience, care burden and intersectional outcomes.
Belgium	The Interfederal Plan for Integrated Care promotes person-centred and cross-sector cooperation.	Service integration appears in only about 11% of the reviewed frameworks. Continuity and coordination could therefore be measured explicitly.
United Kingdom	The Green Book and Magenta Book provide mature appraisal and evaluation guidance.	The findings add a social-service perspective to Beyond-GDP measurement, with particular attention to care, prevention, integration, lived experience and equity.

Policy descriptions: official sources [2–11].

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Four actions for policymakers

Based on the findings of the BENEFITS project, the following recommendations aim to support more effective evaluation, funding, and policymaking for social services. These recommendations will be further developed, tested, and refined with service providers from across Europe and shared through the BENEFITS Social Services Knowledge Platform.

1

Develop and test common social service measures

EU funding programmes and national evaluation authorities should develop, together with providers and people using services, a small common set of social service measures, starting with care, prevention and coordination. These would sit alongside existing indicators, spending and activity data, and should be checked for usefulness and reporting demands. Four questions guide them:

Access and adequacy. Can people access adequate support?

Outcomes and experience. Do people feel their lives have improved since receiving support?

Quality and governance. Is delivery high-quality, coordinated and accountable?

Sustainability. Is the service sustainable over time?

Evidence: Care, coordination and prevention are among the least covered domains in the reviewed frameworks. The review proposes these four evaluation dimensions. [1]

Policy context: The European Pillar of Social Rights and its Action Plan address poverty and social exclusion; the European Care Strategy addresses access and quality. [2, 10]

2

Make proportionate evaluation a funding expectation

Not every programme needs the same level of scrutiny: a small local provider should not face the same complex evaluation as a national reform. Funders should set basic requirements for every programme and ask for more advanced methods only when budgets, risks or scaling decisions justify it, with support for smaller organisations to meet them.

Evidence: Economic, experimental, participatory and indicator-based methods each have strengths and limits; no single method captures every aspect of a service. [1]

Policy context: Italy's national social services plan and the UK's appraisal and evaluation guidance offer settings to test proportionate requirements. [6, 9]

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People's experience and shared learning

Actions for policymakers (continued)

3

Combine administrative data with lived experience

Evaluation should regularly gather the views of people using services and their carers. They can speak to dignity, autonomy, trust, unmet need and coordination in ways routine records cannot. Where feasible, results should be broken down by gender, age, disability, migration status and other characteristics, to show how disadvantages combine. Results should also be published faster, while protecting the privacy of small groups.

Evidence: 89% of frameworks rely on administrative data, which rarely captures people's experience; only 62% draw on surveys. [1]

Policy context: The European Pillar of Social Rights and the EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities commit to equality and participation, as do Greek and Austrian inclusion policies. [4, 7, 10, 11]

4

Create a European learning loop across the partner countries

National and regional authorities could test a small set of shared indicators across the seven partner countries, while each country keeps its own measures. Comparing both outcomes and how reforms are implemented lets countries learn from one another and judge which lessons transfer. Any headline score should keep its components visible. Findings could feed into the future BENEFITS Social Services Knowledge platform as a shared European resource alongside national systems.

Evidence: Composite scores, used by half of the reviewed frameworks, can hide weak results in individual areas. [1]

Policy context: The seven partner countries govern social services in different ways, which makes them a natural test bed for common measures. [3–9]

A practical next step for discussion

A 12–18-month pilot across a small number of EU- and nationally funded programmes could test how useful common measures are, what reporting costs and how much provider capacity they need, alongside early service outcomes. The aim is to learn what works before wider use.

What comes next

The next brief will present the BENEFITS microsimulation model, which tests policy scenarios and estimates the monetary and distributional effects of social services. A later brief will share lessons from testing evaluation approaches with providers, citizens and policymakers.

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Sources and evidence notes

[1] BENEFITS (2025). Deliverable D1.1 - Meta-Analysis of Existing Indicators. Systematic review of 66 Beyond-GDP frameworks selected from 213 candidates, mapped against a 22-domain taxonomy and analysed for coverage, methodology, timeliness and equity. Project number 101179032. Full report

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[4] Greece. Ministry of Social Cohesion and Family. National Strategy for Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction and national monitoring mechanism. Ministry reference

[5] Spain. Ministry of Social Rights, Consumer Affairs and 2030 Agenda. State Strategy for a New Model of Care in the Community: Deinstitutionalisation 2024–2030. Official strategy

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[11] European Commission (2021). Union of Equality: Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030, COM(2021) 101 final. Strategy

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