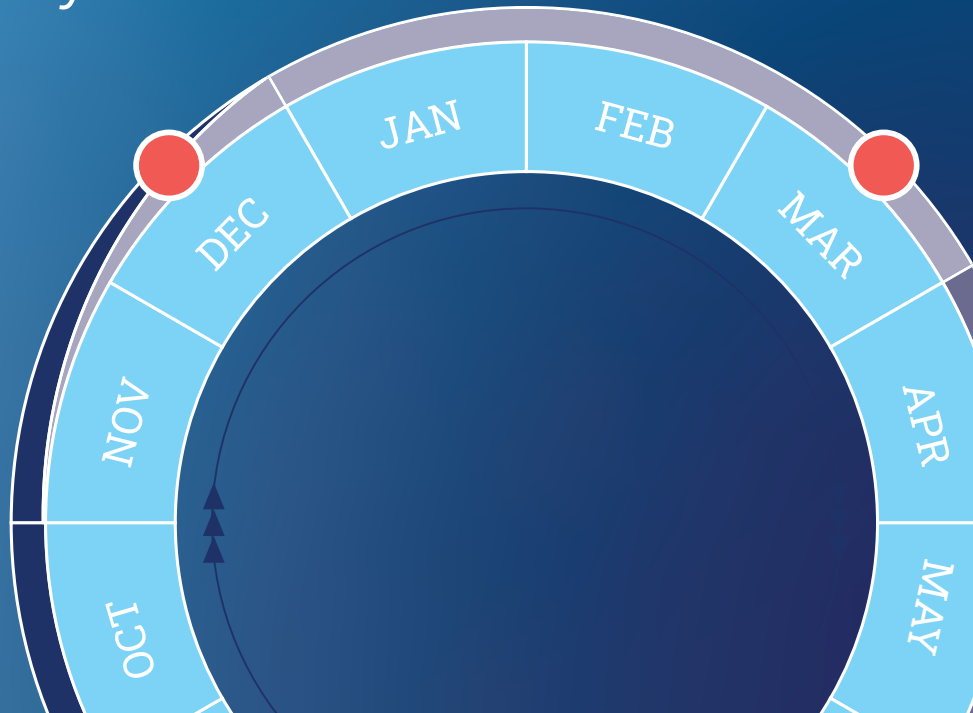
EUROCARERS
European Association Working for Carers

USING THE EU SEMESTER to strenghten informal carers' advocacy in your country

A Eurocarers' Policy Briefing



October 2026

The EU Semester now covers care and helps track how the European Care Strategy is being put into practice. It can also support investment in long-term care (LTC). Carers' organisations need to be recognised as key stakeholders in this process and to use it at national level to push for their priorities. This is especially important to make sure carers' issues stay high on the agenda, even in the current context of fiscal restraint.

This briefing explains what the EU Semester is and how it links to the European Care Strategy. It also shows how the Semester dealt with long-term care challenges in 2026 and how Eurocarers' members can use this process to influence policy progress related to LTC.

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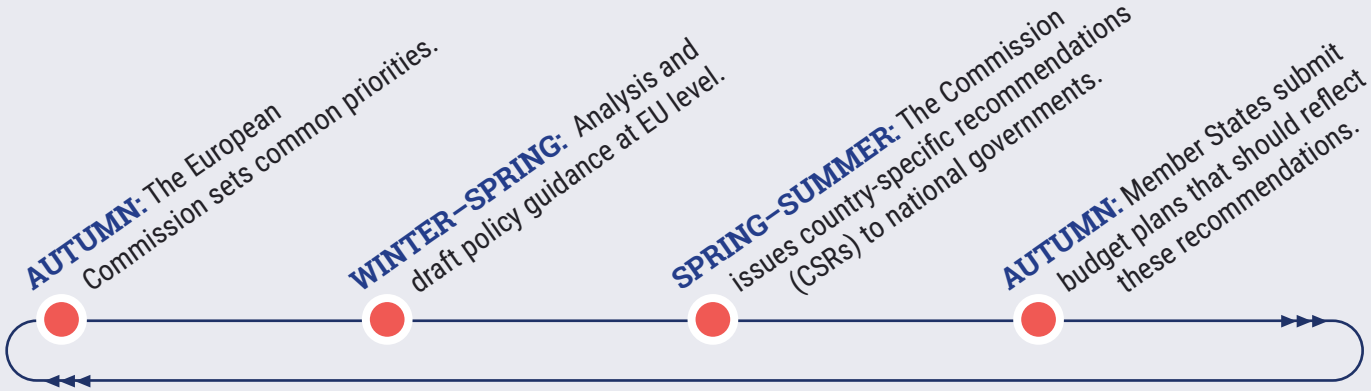
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What is the European Semester?

The European Semester process ("the Semester") is an annual year-long EU mandatory process that coordinates, monitors and evaluates Member States' economic, fiscal, social, employment, environmental, energy, and climate policies, reforms and investments. Since its inception in 2011, it has evolved throughout the years to encompass a broader range of policies, making it a pivotal mechanism for monitoring and executing employment, social, health and environmental policies at both the EU and national levels. It helps EU countries align national policies with shared EU goals on economic stability, job creation, social inclusion and public spending. In essence, the Semester is a policy steering and monitoring tool: it encourages EU countries to make reforms, invest wisely including European Funds and to balance social and economic objectives.

How the EU semester works

The Semester cycle runs from autumn to the following autumn as described below, starting with EU-level priority setting and ending with Member States submitting draft budgets.



The Semester is a key policy instrument at European level, which now monitors progress in long-term care

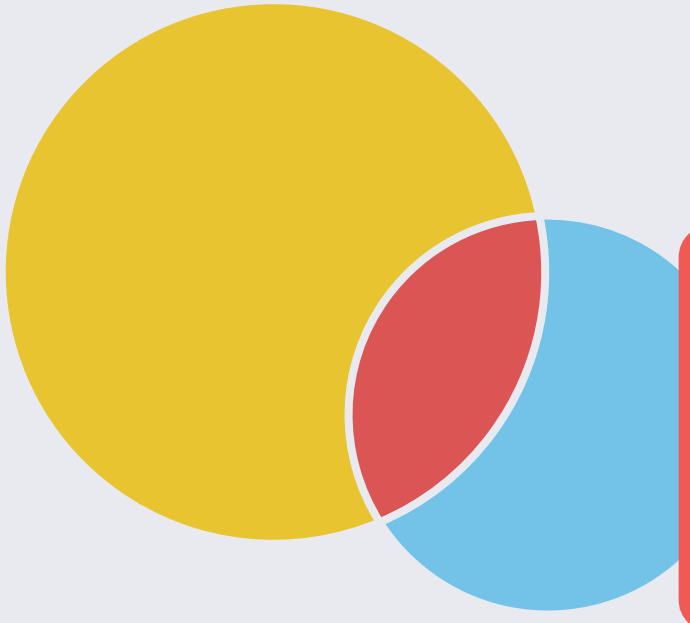
At national level, the European Semester is reflected in a small set of key documents. These include the Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs), which set out the main policy priorities for each Member State; the national medium-term fiscal-structural plans, which describe governments' budgetary and reform strategies; and the Commission's Country Reports, which provide an analytical overview of economic, social and employment challenges. Together, these documents form the core of the Semester's guidance to Member States.

How the European Care Strategy and the European Semester Connect

With the adoption of a Council Recommendation on long-term care (LTC) on 8 December 2022, Member States committed to improving access to affordable, high-quality LTC for all those who need it. This includes addressing the adequacy of social protection for LTC, the challenges faced by both formal and informal carers, and LTC governance. These commitments form the basis of the '**European Care Strategy**'. The successful implementation of the Care Strategy is facilitated by activities directly undertaken by the European Commission (e.g. data collection, research funding, mutual learning programmes, policy dialogues, technical assistance....) and through EU Funds managed at national level. Importantly, this Strategy adheres to the principle of subsidiarity, meaning it does not impose any binding legislative measure on Member States, thereby allowing them full autonomy in their reform efforts. Member States have **appointed a LTC coordinator to support the implementation of the Strategy at the national level**. They have committed to sharing the measures they have taken or plan to take to implement the strategy in the LTC reports. The list of the LTC national coordinators and the national LTC reports are publicly available on the European Commission's webpage dedicated to LTC.

The European Semester is an important follow-up and monitoring mechanism for the Care Strategy, in different ways:

- **IMPLEMENTATION MONITORING:**
  The EU uses the Semester to monitor how Member States put into practice the Care Strategy recommendations.
- **POLICY INTEGRATION:**
  The Care Strategy's goals — such as improving quality and access to care, addressing workforce shortages — are fed into the wider social and employment policy guidance of the Semester.
- **COUNTRY-SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS**:
  The Semester can include recommendations to national governments that support reforms in care systems.



In short:

the European Care Strategy sets goals and principles, and the European Semester helps ensure they are taken up and implemented in national policies through ongoing monitoring, dialogue and tailored recommendations.

Semester 2026: what's in it for informal carers?

Integration of the Care Strategy in the Semester

The Care Strategy should guide comprehensive reforms across all Member States, aimed at improving both the provision of LTC services and the situation of informal carers, and should be underpinned by strong political commitment and an adequate level of public investment. The Semester is the EU's main instrument for monitoring governments' commitments to the Care Strategy and for encouraging them to prioritise their spending accordingly, despite a challenging environment marked by constraints on public budgets and international instability. The adoption of the Monitoring Framework for the Council Recommendation on Access to Affordable High-Quality Long-Term Care in 2025 should help turn principles into practice in 2026 and in the years to come. It identifies measurable, comparable, and actionable indicators for each of the key dimensions of the Strategy, making it easier to assess and compare the state of play at national level across the EU.

As part of the European Semester process, EU institutions issue between one and six concise Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs) to each Member State, outlining the main priorities to consider when designing national budgets and planning EU funding. Initially, LTC appeared only in Portugal's CSRs in 2020. In 2026, our review of the CSRs shows that **twenty-one** recommendations address LTC-related issues, a substantial increase from the fourteen recommendations issued in 2025. This reflects the agenda-setting impact of the European Care Strategy, which has helped further mainstream care within EU guidance on broader public policies.

LTC-related issues appear in priorities for 21 countries

Given that the European Semester is the EU's main process for monitoring and coordinating budgetary and fiscal policies, CSRs traditionally approach LTC from a financial sustainability perspective. However, in 2026, there was a stronger emphasis on the key elements presented in the 2022 Council Recommendation on access to affordable high-quality long-term care: namely **access** (Bulgaria, Estonia, Spain, Croatia, Italy, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Finland), **affordability** (Belgium, Estonia, Italy, Cyprus, Slovakia), **quality** (Germany, Italy, Latvia, Hungary, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia), and **improving availability of services** (Germany, Spain, Cyprus, Poland, Portugal).

This being said, seven countries received CSRs on **financial sustainability**. Attention was brought to **cost effectiveness** in six countries (Belgium, Germany, Spain, Netherlands, Austria, Slovakia). Sustainability, however, does not necessarily imply austerity; Estonia received a CSR on **providing adequate public financing** for the long-term care system.

Developing LTC alongside early childhood education and care is recommended as a means to improve **employment rates** (Czechia, Greece, Italy), recognising the negative impact that insufficient services have on the socio-economic situation of women and underrepresented groups in the labour market. The EU also emphasises the need to respond to **workforce challenges** through CSRs to Lithuania on workforce shortages and Slovenia on non-wage working conditions.

CARE STRATEGY OBJECTIVES IN THE CSRs:

- "Make the **long-term care** system more cost-effective, while keeping access to care and services affordable." (*Belgium*)
- "Address social inclusion by improving access to better integrated employment and social services, **community-based long-term care**, and a more effective minimum income support." (*Bulgaria*)
- "Improve the availability and quality of early childhood education and care and all-day schools, as well as of cost-efficient **long-term care**." (*Germany*)
- "Improve accessibility and affordability of healthcare and **long-term care**, including to address regional disparities, by ensuring funding." (*Estonia*)
- "Improve access to healthcare by increasing the capacities of primary care and **long-term care**, addressing workforce shortages and reducing waiting times. Address regional disparities in access to opportunities and services, especially in areas facing rapid depopulation, while increasing efficiencies that create fiscal space to address increasing spending pressures." (*Spain*)
- "Improve access to formal home- and community-based long-term care." (*Croatia*)
- "Improve access to quality healthcare and **long-term care**, in particular preventive and primary care services." (*Hungary*)
- "Support labour market participation, including by improving active labour market policies and access to affordable and quality **care services**, taking into account territorial disparities." (*Italy*)
- "Expand the availability and coverage of **long-term care** services, broaden eligibility, and reduce high out-of-pocket payments." (*Cyprus*)
- "Strengthen social protection to reduce poverty and inequality, including by improving the adequacy of old-age pensions and the access to quality **social services**." (*Latvia*)
- "Strengthen access to primary, preventive and community-based care and increase the availability of health and **long-term care** professionals, particularly in remote areas." (*Lithuania*)
- "Increase access and quality of **long-term care** services." (*Poland*)
- "Ensure equal access to quality **long-term care**, including by addressing regional disparities and strengthening home and community-based care solutions." (*Portugal*)
- "Reduce poverty and social exclusion risks by extending social protection and improving its effectiveness, including through better access to quality services, focusing on primary and preventive healthcare, **long-term care**, social, educational and employment services, in particular for disadvantaged groups, while maintaining fiscal sustainability." (*Romania*)
- "Strengthen the resilience and fiscal sustainability of the health and long-term care systems and ensure affordable and quality **long-term care**, in particular by further expanding community-based services." (*Slovakia*)
- "Continue improving the efficiency of the social and healthcare services while pursuing efforts to enhance access to services, including **elderly care**." (*Finland*)

SUSTAINABILITY IN THE CSRs:

- "Make the **long-term care** system more cost-effective, while keeping access to care and services affordable." (Belgium)
- "Improve the availability and quality of early childhood education and care and all-day schools, as well as of cost-efficient **long-term care**." (*Germany*)
- "Improve access to healthcare by increasing the capacities of primary care and **long-term care**, addressing workforce shortages and reducing waiting times. Address regional disparities in access to opportunities and services, especially in areas facing rapid depopulation, while increasing efficiencies that create fiscal space to address increasing spending pressures." (*Spain*)
- "Address the expected increase in age-related expenditure in **long-term care** by making the system more cost-effective." (*Netherlands*)
- "Take decisive action to safeguard the sustainability of public finances, including by improving the fiscal sustainability of the healthcare, **long-term care** and pension systems, by, among other things, streamlining hospital infrastructure, improving the cost-effectiveness of healthcare and **long-term care**, strengthening digitalisation and disease prevention to foster expenditure control, and significantly increasing the effective retirement age." (*Austria*)
- "Strengthen the resilience and fiscal sustainability of the health and long-term care systems and ensure affordable and quality **long-term care**, in particular by further expanding community-based services" (*Slovakia*)
- "Public expenditure on health and **long-term care** is well below the EU average, contributing to significant unmet needs, high out-of-pocket payments and limited availability of **long-term care** services, particularly **home-based care**, leading to continued reliance on **informal care**, that disproportionately affect lower-income groups and increases poverty risks among those in need of care." (*Estonia*)

INVEST IN LTC TO SUPPORT EMPLOYMENT IN THE CSRs:

- "Provide incentives for parents to return to work and improve the supply of childcare and **long-term care** services to encourage more women to enter the labour market." (*Czechia*)
- "Increase the employment rate of women, young people and vulnerable groups, and improve job quality by promoting flexible work arrangements and expanding formal early childhood education and care and **long-term care**." (*Greece*)
- "Support labour market participation, including by improving active labour market policies and access to affordable and quality **care services**, taking into account territorial disparities." (*Italy*)

ADDRESSING WORKFORCE CHALLENGES IN THE CSRS

- "Strengthen access to primary, preventive and community-based care and increase the availability of health and **long-term care** professionals, particularly in remote areas." (*Lithuania*)
- "Further improve the non-wage working conditions, particularly in the healthcare, social and **long-term care** and teaching sectors." (*Slovenia*)

The table below outlines the key points in the CSRs related to care in 2026. Notably the Care Strategy's main objectives for LTC- access, affordability, and quality, which are promoted heavily across countries. ✔

Country	Sustainability / cost effectiveness	Adequate financing	Services availability	Access	Affordability	Quality	Addressing staff shortages	Raising the employment rate
Austria	✔							
Belgium	✔				✔			
Bulgaria				✔				
Croatia				✔				
Cyprus			✔	✔	✔			
Czechia								✔
Estonia		✔		✔	✔			
Finland				✔				
Germany	✔		✔			✔		
Greece								✔
Hungary				✔		✔		
Italy				✔	✔	✔		✔
Latvia				✔		✔		
Lithuania				✔			✔	
The Netherlands	✔							
Poland			✔	✔		✔		
Portugal			✔	✔		✔		
Romania				✔		✔		
Slovakia	✔				✔	✔		
Slovenia							✔	
Spain	✔		✔	✔				
21 countries	**6 ✔**	**1 ✔**	**5 ✔**	**13 ✔**	**5 ✔**	**8 ✔**	**2 ✔**	**3 ✔**

Informal carers mentioned specifically in 6 countries' documents

While the CSRs summarise the main priorities for Member States, they are based on a thorough analysis of national-level challenges, refined through an annual dialogue between Commission services and national governments. A detailed review of all Semester documents falls outside the scope of this publication. Nevertheless, the examples below illustrate that relevant guidance on specifically related to informal care can also be found in Semester documents, even though informal care was not mentioned at all directly in the CSRs. In 2025, informal care was mentioned in four countries' documents and now, in 2026, informal care is present in the materials of six countries (Croatia, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Portugal).

Poland

"Long-term care services are not prepared to meet growing demographic challenges. Public expenditure on long-term care remains low and largely allocated to residential care (significantly above the EU average), whereas programmes aimed at developing homecare or community-based care remain underfunded or highly dependent on EU funding. This translates in high out-of-pocket costs for people in need and a high reliance on informal care for home-based services. Poland would benefit from improving the quality of and access to long-term care services, particularly of homecare and community-based care, including by increasing related financing and its sustainability."

Portugal

"Portugal is among the EU Member States facing a more rapidly ageing population, which implies significant and growing long-term care needs. However, public investment in long-term care is well below EU average and planning of long-term care provision remains uncoordinated. The provision of long-term care is skewed towards residential care, while home-based and community-based solutions could contribute to improving the ability of people to live independently. There are also regional disparities in the access to quality long-term care across the country, with rural areas particularly underserved. The actions taken by Portugal so far (such as improvements in the status of informal carers and a pilot project on home support services) have had limited effectiveness or suffer from limited foreseen coverage. Supporting affordable options based on needs, including by strengthening home and community-based care, improving planning and closing the regional gaps could contribute to ensuring equal access to quality long-term care."

Croatia

*"Access to long-term care remains insufficient, with limited access to home-based and community-based care relative to rising demand, high out-of-pocket costs, and unmet care needs among older people that are among the highest in the EU. This places disproportionate care burdens on **informal carers, especially women**, reducing their labour market participation. Addressing these challenges would contribute to upward social convergence."*

Estonia

"Public expenditure on health and long-term care is well below the EU average, contributing to significant unmet needs, high out-of-pocket payments and limited availability of long-term care services, particularly home-based care, leading to continued reliance on informal care, that disproportionately affect lower-income groups and increases poverty risks among those in need of care."

Hungary

"High out-of-pocket costs limit access for vulnerable groups, while staff shortages shift care burdens onto healthcare systems and families, reducing care quality and women's labour market participation."

Germany

"Strengthening quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) and all-day schools could further enable full-time employment of carers, often women, as well as promote equal opportunities for children. Half of all female employees work part-time, one of the highest levels in the EU. Caring for children and elderly relatives is a frequent reason for working part-time, partly driven by a gap in the provision of quality, flexible ECEC and all-day schools. (...) Expanding cost-efficient long-term care, especially home and outpatient-based services, could also provide relief from caring responsibilities and promote intergenerational fairness."

How Eurocarers' members can leverage the Semester for their advocacy work

The Semester might once have seemed a complex process, distant from the concrete concerns of carers, yet it has become a relevant policy tool by integrating LTC policies. The various documents pinpoint both progress and gaps in the implementation of the Care Strategy, while taking a broader view of LTC and highlighting the high cost of inaction on a country's overall situation. This presents a rare opportunity to revitalise advocacy efforts. Carers and carers' organisations eager to seize this 'alignment of the planets' will find a few tips below.

- **IDENTIFY THE CHALLENGES IN THE SEMESTER**
- **BUILD ALLIANCES**
- **ENGAGE**
- **SHARE YOUR INITIATIVES**

Identify where and how LTC challenges are addressed in the Semester

Review your Semester documents (National Report, Commission Country Report, CSRs - available by country here). This can be easily done through a search of key words ('long-term care', 'care', 'carers'), which will directly lead to the relevant paragraph(s). You might combine these elements with:

- data from the Monitoring Framework, which situates your country in relation to other European countries (see in particular Annex 3 and 4),
- information from your country LTC Report, building on Eurocarers analysis of the LTC Reports.

Pick the elements that you find relevant to strengthen your advocacy work to advance carers' rights at national level, and your requests for public grants.

If you notice inaccurate or insufficient accounts of the situation of informal carers in these documents compared with your knowledge of the reality in the country, this can be a topic to pursue in a dialogue with your national public authorities in charge of LTC in your country.

Build alliances

Informal care cannot be seen as a standalone topic. Addressing informal carers' needs calls for actions across a range of interconnected policy areas, including health and formal care services, employment, ICT, anti-discrimination… Identifying allies amongst the community of stakeholders in your country/region (e.g. trade unions, local authorities, aging or disability organisations, women's or migrants organisations, etc…) and contributing to advocacy platforms focusing on care in general can only help informal carers gain greater visibility, be involved in advocacy efforts and achieve a greater impact. Such platforms could be useful at national level to ensure the Care Strategy is implemented in a participative way, and that the Semester supports positive reforms in care.

Engaging in the 2027 cycle

By the end of April 2027, Member States are expected to submit their medium-term fiscal-structural plans to the Commission for evaluation. You/your organisation may wish to engage in the drafting of these plans to help ensure that carers' concerns are appropriately addressed. Please note that the EU has issued guidance to Member States on key priorities in the labour market and social domains, including specific attention to informal carers (see box below).

"Ensure non-discrimination, promote gender equality, improve equality mainstreaming and strengthen the labour market participation of women and disadvantaged groups, by fostering equal opportunities and career progression, ensuring equal pay for equal work, or work of equal value, pay transparency, and promoting the reconciliation of work, family and private life – including through access to affordable and high-quality care (early childhood education and care, and long-term care), and family related leave and flexible working arrangements for parents and other informal carers, in line with the European Care Strategy, as well as by ensuring accessibility in the work place." (In Joint Employment Report, 2025, page 24).

Civil society organisations are deeply concerned with the predominant focus on competitiveness and defence set by the EU in response to the deteriorating international outlook, as it risks undermining the EU's social goals and deprioritising essential social investment. To avoid long-term care policies being relegated to the background, carers' interests and concerns should be promoted. Every opportunity to have them and their concerns put on the policy agenda should be seized. Security, competitiveness and the resilience of the EU cannot be built on a fragmented society, but rather on adequate modernised social protection and social services that are compatible with the challenges of demographic change.

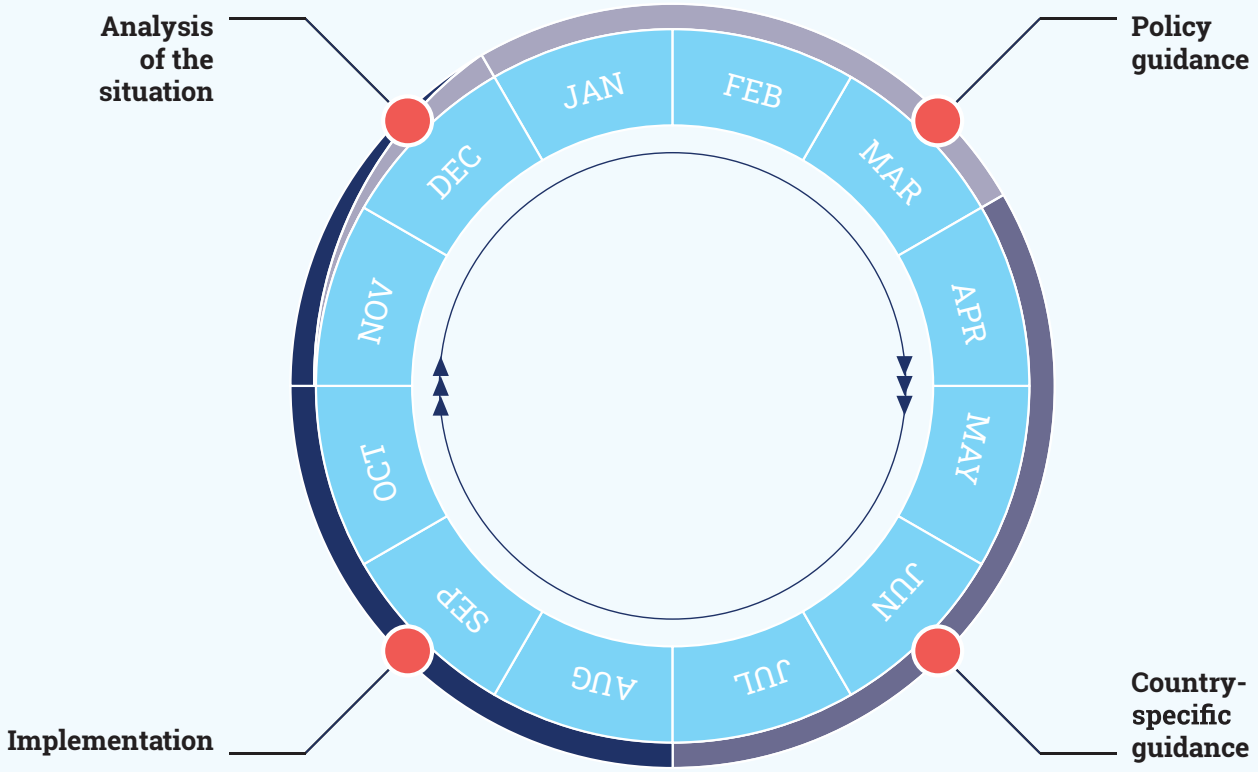
Share your advocacy initiatives through Eurocarers' channels

Your initiatives might inspire other Eurocarers' members and inform our collective work. Please do share your experience with the Eurocarers' Secretariat who will ensure adequate promotion (hs@eurocarers.org).

Eurocarers' Secretariat can also share your contribution with the European Commission's Desk Officers in charge of the countries' analysis, with a view to complement official information. Do not hesitate to share your publications (letters, position papers, studies...) as well as those of other relevant organisations publicly.

Conclusions

The Semester has become an important process for informal carers over the recent years, drawing attention to and investment in LTC services and support to informal carers. Visibility of long-term care has been growing incrementally since the adoption of the European Care Strategy in 2022, with the 2026 Semester showing a marked increase with the majority of Member States receiving a CSR concerning long-term care (21 out of 27 Member States). Informal care specifically is also gaining more attention in the European Semester with the need to take action to support informal carers featured in six country reports. In 2027, the European Commission will publish a renewed plan for action on care: the European Care Deal. It is essential that the widespread challenges brought to light in the European Semester 2026 are responded to with clear policy guidance and investment in this new European Care Deal, something Eurocarers will engage in.



References

2026 Country Specific Recommendations

2026 Country Reports

2026 Joint-Employment Report

2025 EU Monitoring Framework on the Council Recommendation on access to affordable high-quality long-term care

2024 Country Implementation Reports on the Council Recommendation on Access to High-Quality Long-Term Care

2022 European Care Strategy

European Semester explained

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