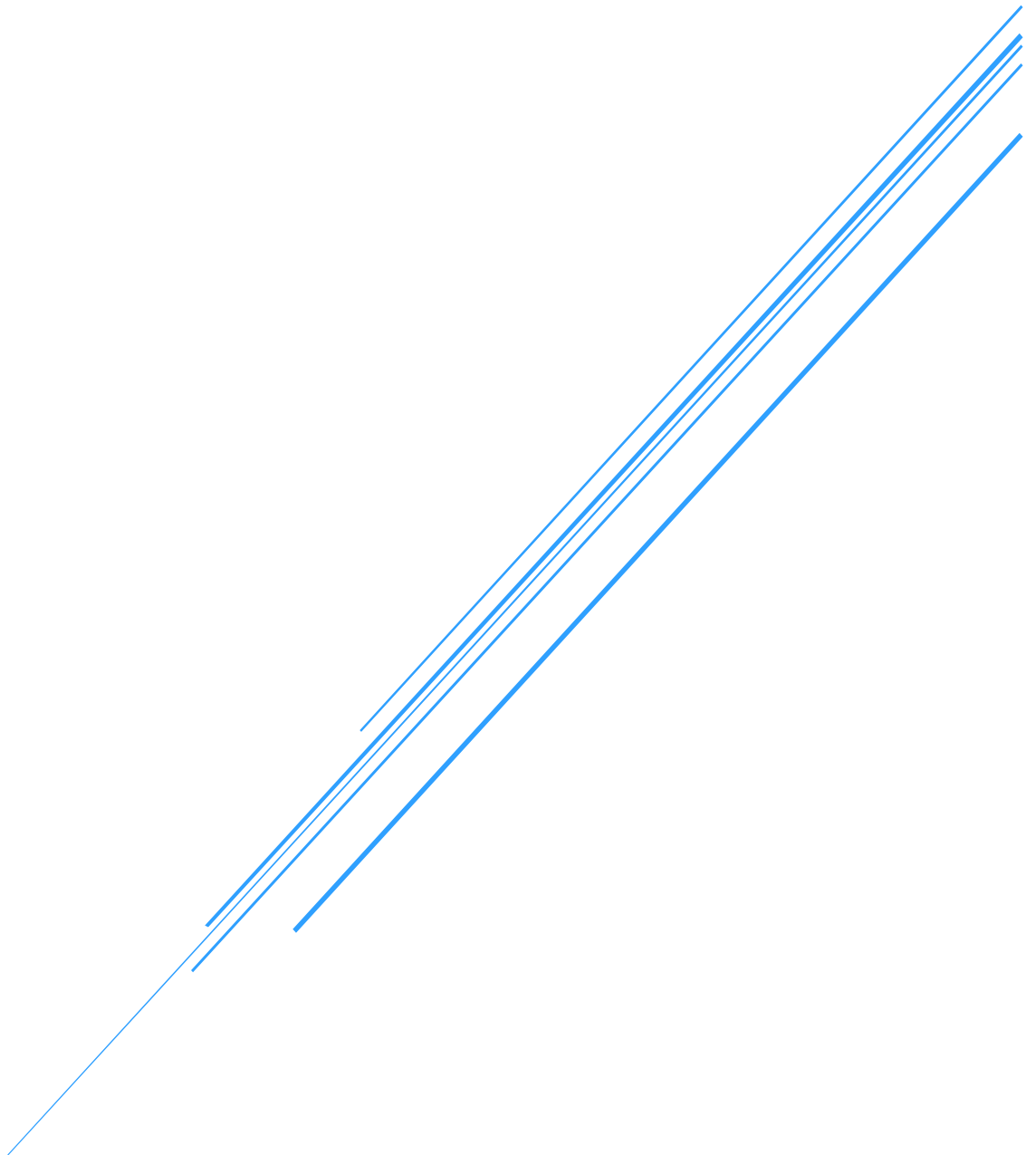DLR-PT

SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS & ESSENTIAL SERVICES

Towards a Strategic Research & Innovation Agenda for the New European Partnership on Social Transformations and Resilience

Content:

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of a Strategic Foresight process designed to explore future developments affecting social protection systems and essential services in Europe. The aim of this foresight process was to inform the Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda (SRIA) of the future European Partnership on Social Transformations and Resilience, which will guide research and innovation activities from 2027 to 2033. As part of a wider foresight programme covering all four impact areas of the Partnership, this third cycle focused on the modernisation, inclusiveness, and resilience of Europe's welfare systems. These systems face growing pressure from demographic change, labour market transformation, the green and digital transitions, climate change, sudden shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic, and declining institutional trust.

To anticipate major developments and assess their strategic relevance, the foresight cycle combined desk research, expert interviews, an online survey, and a trend workshop. The process began with the identification of 25 trends shaping the futures of social protection systems and essential services. These trends were derived from recent academic studies, foresight analyses, and institutional reports addressing demographic shifts, labour market change, social inequalities, digitalisation, climate impacts, and welfare governance. Five expert interviews helped refine and contextualise the initial trend landscape, identify overlooked dynamics, and situate developments within broader structural transitions.

An online survey was then disseminated to approximately 450 hand-selected experts and relevant networks. Responses from 138 participants in 24 countries helped validate, correct, and prioritise the trend list. The resulting ranked set of ten trends was further refined using qualitative input from interviews and survey comments. Taken together, these trends reveal how ageing, labour market polarisation, the growth of precarious work, rising mental health needs, climate-related pressures, digital transformation, migration, and declining trust are reshaping social vulnerability, redistributive capacity, and the organisation of essential services.

The selected trends illustrate intensifying pressure on pension and care systems, widening divides between secure and precarious work, growing mental health challenges, increased exposure to climate shocks and policy-driven transition costs, and reduced confidence in welfare institutions. They also highlight the opportunities and risks associated with digitalisation, which is changing how services are delivered and accessed. Overall, the trends point to significant challenges for the adequacy, fairness, and sustainability of Europe's welfare systems.

The first, second, and third order implications of these ten trends were examined during a workshop with 33 participants from 15 European countries. Participants came from research institutions, public authorities, civil society, and funding bodies. Using the Futures Wheel method, they mapped cascading effects, identified interdependencies, and highlighted conditions under which welfare systems might either mitigate or amplify emerging inequalities.

Based on the trend validation and the workshop material, a best-case scenario for 2040 was developed. The scenario does not predict the future. Instead, it presents a desirable future state in which Europe's social protection systems and essential service provision have adapted to demographic, technological, and ecological transitions. The scenario is organised into four interconnected pillars:

— **Income Security and Inclusive Labour Market Participation**, where gaps in coverage and adequacy narrow and employment support is accessible across a wide range of work trajectories.

— **Shock Responsive and Climate Fair Social Protection**, where welfare systems help limit both climate damage or negative effects of shocks like epidemics or pandemics and the uneven burdens created by mitigation policies.

— **Human Centred Digitalisation of Social Protection Systems and Essential Services**, where digital tools enhance access and efficiency without reinforcing inequality or eroding trust.

— **Trustworthy, Coordinated, and Inclusive Welfare Governance**, where institutions reduce administrative barriers, strengthen fairness and accountability, and respond more coherently to shared European challenges.

Together, these pillars describe a future in which welfare systems remain sustainable while becoming more anticipatory, inclusive, and resilient.

The scenario will guide the next stage of the foresight process. In early 2026, a backcasting exercise will identify the enabling conditions, research needs, and strategic actions required to move toward this desired 2040 future. The results will provide direct input to the SRIA and will help shape research and innovation priorities that lay the foundations for policies geared at strengthening social resilience across Europe.

1. Background and Introduction

Europe is undergoing profound transformations. The green and digital transitions, demographic shifts, and unforeseen disruptions such as pandemics or economic crises are reshaping societies and institutions. In this rapidly changing world, it is crucial that European societies become more inclusive, cohesive, and resilient. In an era of accelerating change, strengthening Europe's capacity for social resilience, cohesion, and innovation is not only a strategic necessity, but a foundation for inclusive and sustainable futures.

In response to these challenges, the European Commission has proposed a co-funded **European Partnership on Social Transformations and Resilience** (STR) under the Horizon Europe Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (R&I). By bringing together insights from the humanities and social sciences, the Partnership aims to promote inclusive sustainable development and to strengthen cultural, social and economic resilience.

The **overarching goals** of the STR Partnership are to:
➢ Create a 7-year Research and Innovation (R&I) programme for the social sciences and humanities (SSH) to explore and make use of their potential to build resilience, ensure fairness and inclusiveness, and foster social cohesion in the light of changes in climate and environment, technology, demography, and unexpected shocks.
➢ Develop knowledge, tools and innovative solutions to address contemporary social challenges in a collaborative, interdisciplinary and systematic way.
➢ Contribute to new strategies and policy solutions at European, national, and regional level.' (Draft proposal 2025)

Throughout 2024, a drafting group has developed the Commission's initial proposal into a fully-fledged programme of interest to the Partnership's future partners. The Draft Guidance Proposal focuses on **four key impact areas**:
1. Supporting the modernisation of social protection systems and essential services
2. Shaping the future of work
3. Fostering education and skills development
4. Contributing to a fair transition towards climate neutrality

A central element of the future Partnership will be a **Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda** (SRIA) that will guide the Partnership's work from 2027 to 2033. The SRIA is expected to anticipate the main challenges to be addressed, propose lines of enquiry, and outline actions that translate research into strategies for policy-making. It will serve as a flexible framework for topics and activities of short-, medium-, and long-term relevance, while allowing for adaptation and iteration in response to emerging needs.

To ensure the SRIA is future-oriented and policy-relevant, the drafting process is informed by **Strategic Foresight**. This methodology enables the systematic exploration of future developments and supports evidence-based, proactive decision-making. Strategic Foresight is already used by the European Commission, national governments, universities, and various other organisations to identify emerging trends, anticipate shocks, and prepare agile responses. It shifts the perspective from reactive to proactive planning.

Methods and tools such as **trend analysis, visioning, and backcasting** are particularly valuable in navigating the dynamic ecosystem in which networks such as HERA (Humanities in the European Research Area) or NORFACE (New Opportunities for Research Funding Agency Cooperation in Europe) and initiatives such as the STR-Partnership operate. These methods help identify and prioritise issues of relevance over different time horizons. Given the complexity of the task, we adopt a **co-creative process** that integrates diverse perspectives from **across Europe**, encompassing **different academic disciplines** (including but not limited to the humanities and social sciences) and a **broad range of stakeholders** (such as policymakers and decision-makers from civil society, social partners, public administrations, and the private sector).

To ensure depth and relevance, we carry out a dedicated Strategic Foresight process for each of the Partnership's four impact areas. The results of these individual foresight exercises will then be synthesised into the final SRIA.

In support of this ambition, HERA has committed to contributing actively to the development of the SRIA and to ensuring that the perspectives of the humanities and social sciences are embedded from the outset. To this end, HERA commissioned DLR Projektträger (DLR-PT) to liaise with the Partnership Drafting Group and the Partnership candidature coordinator. Drawing on its expertise in Strategic Foresight and its long-standing experience in supporting humanities and social sciences research, DLR-PT was commissioned to design and implement the foresight process and, based on the results of the foresight process, to draft the SRIA.

This report presents the findings of the third foresight cycle on '**Social Protection Systems & Essential Services**'. Social protection systems and access to essential services form the backbone of Europe's social model. They play a critical role in reducing inequalities, ensuring social inclusion, and protecting people from life-course and systemic risks. Yet, these systems are under increasing pressure from demographic change, fiscal constraints, digitalisation, and the green transition. This foresight cycle explores how emerging trends are reshaping welfare systems and essential services, and what this means for individuals, communities, institutions, and policymakers seeking to build fair, sustainable, and resilient social protection across Europe.

The report is structured as follows. The **next chapter** provides an overview of the foresight process on Social Protection Systems and Essential Services, including the trend analysis, the online survey, the expert interviews, the trend workshop, and the way these activities contributed to the development of the scenario. **Chapter 3** summarises the insights from the expert interviews, which helped refine and contextualise the trend landscape. **Chapter 4** presents the trend collection, combining findings from desk research with stakeholder input gathered through the survey and the interviews. **Chapter 5** outlines the first and second order implications for each trend. **Chapter 6** presents the best case scenario for the modernisation of social protection systems, based on the validated trends and the implications discussed in the workshop. Finally, **Chapter 7** describes the next steps and explains how the foresight results will be translated into strategic recommendations for the SRIA.

2. Strategic Foresight: Our Process at a Glance

This chapter provides an overview of the foresight process used to examine the future of social protection systems and essential services, with a particular focus on stakeholder engagement and methodological openness. The approach combined systematic desk research with participatory methods to identify, validate, and interpret developments that are expected to influence social protection in the next 10 to 15 years. Experts from Europe and beyond contributed throughout the process, from trend identification and refinement to the analysis of implications and the development of the scenario. **Input was gathered from 138 survey respondents from 24 countries, five in-depth expert interviews, and a trend workshop with 33 participants from 15 countries**. Together, these contributions ensured a wide geographical and disciplinary spread, drawing on perspectives from academia, public authorities, social partners, civil society, non-profit bodies, the private sector, and funding organisations,. The subsections that follow describe the individual steps of the process: trend collection, the online survey, expert interviews, the trend workshop and scenario development.

Figure 1: Our Process at a Glance

	Trend Analysis	Online Survey	Expert Interviews	Trend Workshop	Scenario
WHY	Identify emerging developments	Validate and prioritize trends	Deepen understanding	Explore implications	Build starting point for backcasting
HOW	Desk research & categorization	Rating & comments by stakeholders	Semi-structured interviews	Futures Wheel method in small groups	Synthesis of implications
OUTPUT	Initial list of trends	Ten high-impact trends	Refined trend formulations, nuances	Multi-level implications	Preferred future scenario

2.1 Trend Analysis

The first step in our foresight process focused on identifying key trends shaping social protection systems and essential services in the next 10-15 years. The aim of this phase was to establish a robust, evidence-based foundation for the subsequent steps. By mapping existing knowledge and anticipating potential drivers of change, we sought to build a shared understanding of how social protection systems may evolve over the coming decade.

The trend collection was conducted through systematic desk research, drawing on recent foresight studies, academic literature, and institutional analyses addressing the future of social protection and welfare in Europe. The core reference was the European Commission's *The Future of Social Protection and of the Welfare State in the EU* (2023), complemented by the scoping study by Kangas and Vielle (2025) on the evolution of welfare systems in societal and ecological transitions. Additional sources were selected to capture diverse policy domains and vulnerable groups, ranging from labour market and demographic shifts to health, mental well-being, and housing. These included reports and datasets from Eurofound, Eurostat, the International Labour Office, and civil society organisations, as well as relevant academic studies (see list of references).

From this wide base of literature, an **initial longlist of 25 trends** (see ANNEX) was compiled. Each trend reflected a direction of change – either emerging, accelerating, or evolving – with implications for the design, reach, and sustainability of Europe's social protection systems and essential services. Rather than following a predefined framework, the trends were grouped inductively as patterns and linkages emerged across the literature. Three thematic clusters were identified. Together, these clusters highlight the interdependence between demographic change, labour market transformation, and systemic transitions, underscoring the need for adaptable, inclusive, and future-ready welfare architectures across Europe.

– The Future of Social Cohesion: How Demographic and Social Shifts are Redefining Vulnerability and Welfare Demands (incl. 9 trends)

– The Future of Labour Market Structures: How Flexibility, Fragmentation, and Risk are Evolving (incl. 8 trends)

– The Future Welfare Systems in a Green and Digital Age: How the Twin Transition is Reshaping Services, Jobs and Inequalities (incl. 8 trends)

The goal at this stage was not to filter or prioritise, but to ensure breadth, relevance, and coverage of diverse perspectives on social protection systems and essential services. The trend catalogue was designed to capture structural, economic, and systemic developments affecting welfare provision from demographic ageing and labour market fragmentation to digitalisation, climate pressures, and shifting social needs. This structured catalogue provided the basis for the next stage of the process: the online survey. The survey aimed to validate, refine, and complement the trend landscape with input from a broad range of external experts. While the desk research established a grounded starting point, the trend list remained open to revision and expansion as new insights emerged during subsequent foresight phases.

2.2 Online Survey

To build on the initial trend collection and ensure its relevance from a broader stakeholder perspective, we conducted an **online survey targeting experts** in fields such as welfare state research (including welfare state history), public policy, social policy (including labour market, education, gender and family policy, pension and care policies), population studies (including family, migration, and ageing studies), social economy, political economy, social history, social geography (including rural and urban studies and housing studies), social philosophy, social work, anthropology of welfare, social stratification and social inequality (including poverty studies and eco-social studies), sociology of work and employment, labour law, family law, social security law, anti-discrimination law, disability rights law, minority protection, human rights, social justice (including energy justice and intergenerational justice), public health, health economics, health history, social care, mental health, child and adolescent well-being and mental health, new technologies in welfare provision (including media and communication studies, computational psychology, human-computer interaction, digital health, responsible artificial intelligence), environmental studies, climate policy.

The survey served four key purposes: to validate the trends identified through desk research, to collect expert feedback and suggestions, to establish a ranking based on perceived impact, and to gather initial reflections on potential implications of each trend.

The survey was conducted in English using the LimeSurvey platform. It included a mix of closed and open questions and took between 5 and 20 minutes to complete, depending on how many trends participants chose to comment on. All responses were anonymous and used strictly for research purposes.

The **survey was disseminated** through a combination of targeted outreach and open expert identification. Participants were identified via project-related networks (e.g. CHANSE, HERA, NORFACE), the Partnership Drafting Group, and an online search for individuals working on social protection systems and essential services. The survey was sent to approximately 450 hand-picked individuals and additionally circulated via targeted mailing lists and expert communities, in particular Social Sciences and Humanities communities. We also reviewed and acted upon suggestions regarding additional individuals or organisations who should receive the survey, forwarding it accordingly where feasible. While due to the mailing list and expert community circulation no precise response rate could be calculated, the participant pool reflects a broad and balanced range of disciplinary and institutional backgrounds.

The survey was open from mid-August to mid-September 2025 and received responses from **138 experts across 24 countries**. Most participants came from academia (102), followed by representatives of public authorities (22), civil society (5), and a small number from the private sector and other organisations. Of the 129 respondents who provided gender information, 77 identified as female, 51 as male, and 1 as diverse. Participation was geographically broad, with the highest numbers of respondents from Germany, Poland, Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands. Additional contributions came from across Europe and several non-EU countries, ensuring a wide range of regional perspectives on the future of social protection and essential services (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Geographical distribution of survey responses

Social Protection Systems & Essential Services
138 Respondents | Geographical Distribution
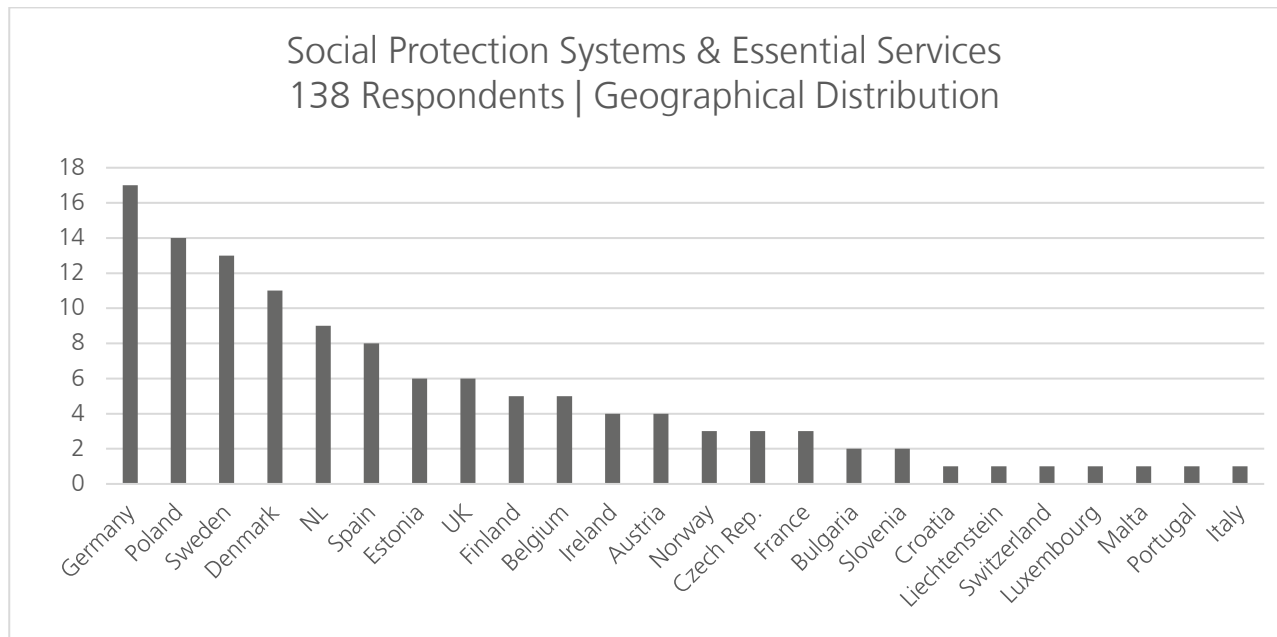
The **analysis of survey results followed a four-step process**. First, all 25 trends were ranked according to their mean impact scores. The ten trends with the highest averages were selected for deeper analysis, representing those developments perceived as most influential for the future of social protection and essential services. To refine the shortlist, overlapping or closely related trends were merged (e.g. ageing and care, climate shocks and social vulnerability, labour-market divides), while distinctiveness was ensured by maintaining separate entries for mitigation- and adaptation-related dynamics. Nuances from the survey—such as automation and AI within digitalisation, climate-induced migration, and trust in media—were integrated into the relevant trend descriptions. The final selection aimed to ensure thematic breadth across key domains, including demography, labour markets, climate, digitalisation, youth, migration, governance, and mental health.

To further streamline the set and prepare for discussion in the subsequent workshop, several closely related trends were consolidated:

- "Demographic Ageing and Fertility Decline" and "Growing Pressure on Care Systems" were combined into *"Demographic Change Strains Labour, Pension and Care Systems."*

- "Widening Labour Market Inequality" and "Unequal Access to Employment Persists Despite Overall Growth" were merged into *"Persistent and Widening Labour Market Divides."*

- "Rising Frequency and Impact of Climate-Related Extremes" and "Climate Impacts Deepen Social Vulnerability" were consolidated into *"Climate Shocks Amplify Social Vulnerabilities."*

To maintain a total of ten trends, three additional high-scoring and thematically distinct trends were included:

- "Youth Unemployment Remains High,"

- "Ongoing Migration," and

- "Erosion of Trust and Administrative Barriers in Welfare Access."

Second, the free text comments associated with each selected trend were analysed. These were used to **refine the wording, clarify ambiguous formulations, and integrate missing nuances**. While no substantive redefinitions

were needed, expert feedback from the free text comments improved the precision and representativeness of the trend descriptions.

Third, we analysed the open-text responses regarding **potential implications of each trend**. These were summarised and categorised into first- and second-order implications, forming a structured foundation for the subsequent scenario development.

Finally, we analysed the responses to the questions asking whether any **trends were missing**. While respondents generally considered the trend catalogue comprehensive, several pointed to areas requiring stronger emphasis. Issues most frequently mentioned included mental health and psychosocial well-being, housing insecurity, labour-market inequalities, migration and integration, and climate-related vulnerabilities; all of which are reflected in the final trend list. Some aspects, such as intergenerational fairness, digital exclusion, and the adequacy and accessibility of basic services, were less explicitly addressed but are indirectly captured in trends on demographic change, youth unemployment, child poverty, and digitalisation of services. Overall, the feedback did not indicate major thematic gaps but highlighted the importance of making these cross-cutting issues more visible. These considerations were taken into account when finalising the trend descriptions in Chapter 4 and during the scenario development in Chapter 5.

2.3 Expert Interviews

To complement the trend collection and survey, we conducted a series of expert interviews. The interviews served **three main purposes**: (1) to discuss and validate key trends identified through our desk research and online survey; (2) to complement the trend landscape with expert insights, including weak signals and overlooked developments; and (3) to explore the implications of these trends for research, policy-making, and society at large.

Five semi-structured expert interviews were conducted with scholars and practitioners from **Ireland, Finland, Belgium, Poland, and Germany**, whose work spans social protection, labour markets, and welfare state reform. The interview partners represented diverse disciplinary perspectives, including comparative social policy, social law, labour relations, and migration economics, as well as the perspective of European social partners. Their expertise covered the governance and legitimacy of welfare institutions, the interaction between social policy and macroeconomic stability, labour market inequalities, and the evolving role of collective actors in shaping fair and adaptive protection systems. Further insights were provided on the social implications of migration and demographic change, the challenges of maintaining adequate and inclusive welfare coverage, and the emerging lessons from basic income experiments. Together, these contributions added empirical depth and policy relevance to the trend analysis, helping to interpret the survey findings and place them within broader structural and institutional transformations in European social protection.

The interviews were conducted using a **semi-structured guide** designed to ensure comparability while leaving room for open reflection. Each interview lasted between about 60 minutes and was **structured around four thematic blocks**: (1) general perspectives on the future of social protection systems and essential services, including long-term developments and overlooked or emerging issues; (2) validation and refinement of selected trends identified in the earlier phases of the project; (3) discussion of implications for research, policy, and societal priorities; and (4) next steps and follow-up opportunities. Experts were asked to comment on three trends of their choice, enabling a focused yet flexible exchange based on their areas of expertise (see also Chapter 3).

2.4 Trend Workshop

As the final step in the trend validation phase, an **online workshop was held on 25 September 2025** to deepen the analysis of key trends shaping the future of social protection systems and essential services. The workshop had **three main objectives**: (1) to validate and enrich the implications of ten pre-selected trends identified through desk research, survey, and expert interviews; (2) to bring together diverse perspectives from across sectors and disciplines; and (3) to generate structured input for the subsequent scenario development process.

Participants

To ensure a diverse and balanced discussion while maintaining an interactive format in the breakout sessions, we initially aimed to engage around 40 participants for the trend workshop. Participants were selected from the pool of experts identified via (1) an online search for individuals working on social protection and welfare state dynamics, (2) project-related networks and (3) the Partnership Drafting Group (see 2.2). One of the main selection criteria was professional respectively technical qualification and relevance regarding the thematical and impact area. Furthermore, in addition to the researchers, the selection reflected a broad range of stakeholders (researchers, policymakers, representatives from social partners, civil society, and public administrations).

A total of **33 participants** took part in the Social Protection Systems & Essential Services workshop, comprising 23 women and 10 men. Participants represented **15 countries** (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom). Institutional affiliations were diverse, with the majority from research-performing organisations (24), alongside representatives from national public authorities, research funding organisations, civil society (incl. international NGOs), and a non-profit organisation. This composition balanced geographical and institutional perspectives while keeping the group small enough to support interactive breakout discussions.

Agenda

The online workshop was designed to support structured, collaborative reflection while creating space for in-depth exchange and cross-sectoral insights. The session opened with a short context-setting presentation, introducing the foresight process and presenting the final top-10 trend set. Participants were then divided into five breakout groups, each working with two of the validated trends.

Table 1: Agenda Future of Work Trend Workshop

Time	Agenda Item	Description
10:00	Welcoming remarks	Introduction by the moderators
10:05	Context setting	Introduction to the project with a focus on the Strategic Foresight process & aims of this specific workshop.
10:10	Icebreaker	'What if, in 2040 – people lived healthy lives to 110 years old? – migration was the norm rather than the exception? – mental health was fully monitored and supported by AI systems?'
10:20	Presentation of selected trends	Presentation of the 10 most impactful key trends relevant to the project
10:30	The Futures Wheel	Introducing the Futures Wheel tool and the approach for the Breakout Sessions
10:35	Breakout Sessions	In-depths discussions on two selected trends for each Breakout Session and their implications
11:40	Break	
11:50	Presentation of results	Reporting back key findings and insights
12:55	Closing remarks	Summary of key findings and future outlook
12:00	The End	

To guide the discussions, each group used a **Futures Wheel template** (see ANNEX), i.e. a structured tool for mapping first-, second-, and even third-order implications of a given trend. This method encouraged participants to look beyond immediate effects and explore cascading consequences for individuals, organisations, and society. Each group was chaired by an expert and supported by a facilitator, who documented the results.

The workshop format was deliberately designed to foster expert-driven knowledge production. Trends were not explained in detail during the breakout sessions; instead, participants had received preparatory material (incl. the top-ten trends) by email in advance. This allowed the available time to be used primarily for discussion. Each group's results were presented by the expert chairs in a short plenary session following the breakout phase, providing a shared view of the diverse implications discussed. Following the workshop, additional feedback was collected from participants to capture further reflections and ensure that no key insights were missed.

The insights generated during the workshop served a dual purpose. First, they helped to test the robustness of the trends by surfacing overlooked dynamics and boundary conditions. Second, they provided a rich pool of implications that will inform the scenario development process and help translate trends into strategic narratives.

2.5 Scenario Development

Following the trend validation and implications analysis, we developed a desirable scenario for the future of social protection and essential services. This scenario is grounded in insights gathered across all earlier phases of the process – the online survey, expert interviews, and the trend workshop – and reflects the collective knowledge generated through those engagements. Specifically, it builds on the implications identified for each of the ten key trends, including first- and second-order effects discussed by the experts.

To prepare this input for scenario development, we first filtered out general reflections or comments that were not directly linked to specific implications. We then grouped similar ideas into core thematic clusters and structured them into a hierarchy of effects. The resulting set of first- and second-order implications provided the foundation for constructing a future-oriented, preferred scenario (see Chapter 5).

The scenario reflects a shared vision of what a desirable future of social protection systems and essential services could look like, assuming that key challenges are addressed and opportunities are actively pursued. It is not a prediction but a normative orientation that synthesises expert perspectives, institutional knowledge, and stakeholder priorities into a coherent narrative. The goal was to translate trend knowledge into a forward-looking scenario that can guide strategic thinking and inspire the next steps in the SRIA-drafting process. This scenario now serves as the basis for the next phase of the foresight process, where pathways, milestones, and enabling conditions will be developed to explore priorities of the forthcoming SRIA.

3. Interview Insights

The expert interviews provided an in-depth perspective on how Europe's social protection systems are evolving under the combined pressures of demographic change, labour-market transformation, technological innovation, and ecological transition. While the experts approached these issues from different disciplinary and national contexts, their reflections converged on the need for more adaptive, anticipatory, and cohesive welfare models capable of linking social resilience with environmental and economic sustainability.

3.1 Refining and Deepening Key Trends

Across the discussions, participants emphasised that the past two decades have been shaped by successive crises—from the financial and migration crises to the COVID-19 pandemic and recent geopolitical shocks. Each revealed new vulnerabilities but also reaffirmed the importance of robust welfare systems as social and economic stabilisers. Instruments such as short-time work schemes and the EU's *SURE* programme were noted as examples of institutional learning, demonstrating that crisis experience can strengthen social policy capacity. Yet, austerity pressures following crises were seen as eroding precisely those stabilising functions that make welfare systems resilient.

Demographic ageing was described as a defining long-term driver of change, reshaping pensions, labour markets, and care systems. Rather than treating ageing solely as a fiscal problem, experts called for policies that mobilise the potential of older workers, adapt workplaces to longer careers, and uphold intergenerational fairness. It was emphasised that population ageing is also linked to migration: labour mobility and successful integration were viewed as essential for sustaining welfare systems and addressing regional labour shortages.

At the same time, experts pointed to persistent and in some cases widening inequality, even in advanced welfare states. The gap between high- and low-income groups, as well as between "native" and new immigrant populations, continues to test social cohesion. Some welfare models that once set international benchmarks now risk stagnation, while others are "catching up" by introducing more universal schemes. Participants cautioned that without renewed investment in inclusion and employment, public trust and the political legitimacy of social protection could weaken.

Labour-market transformation emerged as a central concern. The erosion of stable, full-time employment, the rise of platform work, and declining collective-bargaining coverage were all seen as undermining income security and risk-sharing. Recent EU initiatives such as the Minimum Wage Directive and the Platform Work Directive were regarded as important steps, yet their success depends on enforcement and on the capacity of national systems to adapt. Several experts stressed that reframing social protection as an investment rather than a cost is essential to counteract the "austerity reflex" that follows each crisis.

Digitalisation and automation were discussed as double-edged developments, driving innovation and efficiency but also threatening to deepen divides between high- and low-skilled workers. Participants emphasised that technological change must be accompanied by social regulation and lifelong learning policies to ensure broad access to its benefits. The digitalisation of care and essential services, for example, offers opportunities for accessibility and cost efficiency but also raises issues of digital literacy and equity.

3.2 Emerging and Underexplored Issues

The interviews highlighted a set of emerging issues that extend beyond the current trend framework. A prominent theme concerned the **ecological transition** and its implications for welfare. Experts argued that social protection must not only shield citizens from climate-related risks but also act as a **lever of transformation**, protecting those affected by ecological policies such as industrial reconversion or rising energy costs. New eco-social vulnerabilities—linked to geography, health, housing, and mobility—were seen as creating fresh layers of inequality that traditional systems fail to capture.

Another issue was the **erosion of collective bargaining and social dialogue**, considered key to ensuring fair distribution and social stability. Strengthening these mechanisms was viewed as critical to sustaining inclusive transitions. In addition, experts pointed to the **mental-health consequences** of insecurity, digital stress, and demographic pressures, arguing that psychosocial well-being for all ages should become a central dimension of future welfare strategies.

Finally, several contributions called for renewed reflection on the **ethical and cultural foundations** of welfare. Beyond economic management, social protection was described as a moral and political project that depends on solidarity, trust, and credible narratives of fairness.

3.3 Forward-Looking Perspectives & Suggestions for further Research

A recurrent message was the need to shift from reactive to **anticipatory welfare governance**. Rather than alternating between expansion in crises and retrenchment afterwards, systems should combine short-term protection with long-term preparedness. This entails preventive investment in skills, health, and care infrastructure, as well as adaptive capacity for new employment forms. Multi-level coordination, i.e. between EU, national, and local levels, was seen as essential for steering transitions coherently and avoiding fragmented policy responses. One way of doing so is seen in combining interdisciplinary research of economy and data modelling with social sciences and humanities (such as pension system research with gerontology and health research).

The experts also underlined the **life-course perspective** as a unifying framework for social investment. Early-childhood education, equal labour-market participation, and continuous training were identified as critical levers for reducing inequality in later life, particularly in relation to gender and ageing. Embedding these investments within welfare systems would help shift the focus from compensation to empowerment and long-term social resilience.

The interviews generated several concrete areas for further investigation.

- Comparative analysis of **collective bargaining and social dialogue** as drivers of equitable wealth distribution and legitimacy.
- Evaluation of **platform-work regulation** and its implications for employment status and access to social security.
- Cross-national studies on **eco-social vulnerabilities** and welfare adaptation to the green transition.
- Interdisciplinary research linking **social and environmental sciences** to design new financing models for sustainable welfare.
- Analysis of **migration, inequality, and welfare sustainability**, including intergenerational and intra-household income flows.
- Exploration of **digitalisation in care systems**, balancing efficiency, accessibility, and quality.
- Development of **simulation and foresight models** to test welfare resilience under crisis and demographic scenarios.
- Research on the **ethical, psychological, and cultural dimensions of welfare**, addressing narratives of solidarity and social cohesion.

4. Trend Collection: Social Protection and Essential Services

Overall, the futures of social protection and essential services are shaped by intersecting demographic, economic, environmental, and technological transformations. Ageing populations, shifting family structures, and migration are redefining needs for income security, care, and health services. At the same time, digitalisation and automation are transforming welfare delivery and labour markets, creating new opportunities for efficiency but also new risks of exclusion. Climate change adds further pressure through both mitigation costs and the growing frequency of climate-related shocks, while persistent inequalities and declining institutional trust challenge the legitimacy and accessibility of welfare systems. Together, these developments are testing the resilience, fairness, and adaptability of Europe's social protection systems and their ability to sustain social cohesion and inclusiveness in times of rapid change.

An initial set of 25 trends was identified through desk research. These were then discussed in a series of expert interviews, which helped nuance their interpretation, highlight overlooked aspects, and situate them within broader institutional and societal contexts. Building on this input, the full set of 25 trends was presented to respondents in an expert survey asking the participants to prioritise those ten trends they considered most significant (see also Chapter 2.2).

In the following, the ten trends with the perceived highest impact are presented.

4.1 Demographic Change Strains Labour, Pension, and Care Systems

Europe's population is undergoing a structural transformation as longevity rises and fertility remains well below replacement level. The number of people aged 75 and over is projected to increase from 43.8 million in 2020 to 75.4 million in

2050, while fertility has fallen from 2.4 to 1.5 children per woman since 1970 (European Commission 2023: 10–11). These shifts will shrink the working-age population in 22 of 27 EU countries, and the share of people aged 85+ will more than double (Pinkus & Ruer 2025: 4). As family sizes decline and gender roles evolve, demand for formal care is rising, while labour shortages threaten access and quality (European Commission 2023: 11). Demographic change is structural but manageable through adaptation: healthier ageing, flexible late-career paths, and productivity-enhancing innovation can ease fiscal pressure. For social protection systems, these shifts imply growing pressure on pension financing, care capacity, and intergenerational fairness.

4.2 Persistent and Widening Labour Market Divides

Despite steady employment growth across the EU, structural inequalities in labour markets are deepening. In 2018, 15.2% of workers were classified as low paid, with wage growth for the bottom 40% consistently lagging behind national averages (European Commission 2023: 18–19). Low-quality jobs remain concentrated among young, low-skilled, and migrant workers and are often fixed-term or part-time, reinforcing in-work poverty and reducing future pension adequacy (European Commission 2023: 19, 43). Women continue to face lower employment rates and earnings, particularly following childbirth, resulting in cumulative disadvantages over the life course (Kangas & Vielle 2025: 28). Technological change and automation further polarise skills and wages, intensifying divides between high- and low-quality employment.

Persistent underemployment of young people, women, migrants, and persons with disabilities constrains labour-market participation and weakens social-protection financing (European Commission 2023: 16–18). Declining upward mobility and deteriorating job quality threaten the legitimacy of welfare systems and risk entrenching a dual labour market. For social protection, these divides translate into uneven contribution patterns, lower benefit entitlements, and heightened pressure to ensure fair minimum-income protection, adequate pensions, and renewed social dialogue to sustain cohesion and trust.

4.3 Climate Shocks Amplify Social Vulnerabilities

Climate-related extremes such as floods, droughts, and heatwaves are becoming more frequent and severe across Europe, driving rising human and economic losses. Annual climate-related damages already exceed 12 billion euros, and are likely to rise (European Commission 2021). Such shocks not only destroy infrastructure and livelihoods but also exacerbate existing inequalities, as those in low-income or precarious living conditions are more likely to reside in risk-prone areas, lack insurance, and face barriers to healthcare (ILO 2024: 24–26). Beyond immediate disruption, the cascading effects of heat stress, food insecurity, and housing damage can entrench long-term vulnerability. For social protection systems, more frequent climate shocks imply a growing need for integrated disaster response, income protection, and public-health resilience. Strengthening welfare infrastructure, emergency relief, and adaptive capacity, especially in regions with concentrated poverty, will be crucial to prevent short-term climate hardship from evolving into persistent social inequality.

4.4 Growth of Fragmented and Precarious Work Arrangements

Work in Europe is becoming increasingly fragmented, reflecting a structural shift away from stable, full-time employment. Around 20% of workers are employed part-time (over 50% in the Netherlands and more than 25% in Austria and Germany) while fewer than 10% hold such jobs in many southern and eastern Member States (European Commission 2023: 21). Involuntary part-time work remains significant, exposing many, particularly women and low-skilled workers, to income insecurity and limited access to earnings-related benefits (European Commission 2023: 22). Multiple jobholding is also rising: about 7.5 million people, or 4% of the employed population, hold second jobs, especially in high-income countries (European Commission 2023: 22). At the same time, solo self-employment now accounts for 68% of all self-employment and often lacks adequate protection against sickness, unemployment, or old-age risks (European Commission 2023: 23). These developments signal an ongoing individualisation of risk in European labour

markets, where responsibility for income security increasingly shifts from collective arrangements to the individual. This growing prevalence of fragmented and non-standard work creates gaps in contribution histories, complicates benefit eligibility, and risks widening inequality between secure and precarious forms of employment.

4.5 Climate Policy Costs Intensify Pressure on Low-Income Households

Climate mitigation measures (e.g. carbon pricing, higher energy taxes, and efficiency regulations) are reshaping the cost of living across Europe. As fossil fuel use declines, prices for heating, transport, and food have risen, disproportionately affecting low-income households that spend a larger share of income on basic needs and often lack the means to invest in energy-efficient alternatives (European Commission 2023; Känzig 2023). Recent modelling confirms that households in the lowest income quintiles will bear the greatest relative energy burden under the EU's Fit for 55 package (Rüb et al. 2024). While these policy-driven costs differ from climate shocks, they originate directly from transition measures and risk exacerbating economic inequalities (European Parliament 2023). This "transition burden" underscores the need for adaptive redistribution mechanisms that preserve fairness within the green transition. Rising living costs and unequal access to green investments heighten demands on targeted support schemes and transparent governance to sustain trust and social cohesion as Europe advances toward climate neutrality.

4.6 Mental Well-being and Health of Children and Adolescents is Declining

Mental health among children and adolescents in the EU has deteriorated sharply, with rising rates of mental illness and a significant worsening during the COVID-19 pandemic (OECD 2025: 8–9). Girls consistently report poorer mental well-being than boys, with stronger declines over time (OECD 2025: 8–9), and gender differences are reflected in specific disorders such as eating disorders (Eurostat 2025). Long-term evidence from Sweden shows that mental distress has increased steadily over the past two to three decades, with the sharpest rise in the past ten years (Forte 2025: 4). Additional reflections highlight the influence of overlapping crises (pandemic disruption, climate anxiety, geopolitical insecurity) and the interplay between mental health and lifestyle factors such as physical activity, sleep, and media use. For social protection systems, declining youth mental health implies rising demand for early, community-based support and long-term risks of exclusion. Combined with precarious school-to-work transitions, these developments may reinforce cumulative disadvantage and increase future pressure on health, social, and employment services.

4.7 Digitalisation and AI transform Services and Work

Digitalisation is reshaping how essential services are organised, delivered, and accessed across Europe. Platform-based models dramatically reduce transaction costs and geographic barriers, allowing rapid scaling of services in health, education, and social care (European Commission 2023: 26). During the COVID-19 crisis, digital tools became integral to service provision, and hybrid models combining online and physical delivery have since gained permanence (European Social Network 2021). In healthcare, AI, big-data analytics, and quantum computing enable new functions such as epidemic simulation, therapy monitoring, and integrated follow-up care (Schönermark et al. 2019, in EC 2021). Yet these benefits depend on adequate infrastructure and data governance: automation and algorithmic decision-making also raise concerns about transparency, equity, and privacy (Kaun et al. 2023). As digital systems become embedded in welfare provision, they transform both access and accountability. Efficiency gains can widen inclusion if supported by universal digital skills, but reliance on private platforms risks dependency and loss of public control. For social protection, digitalisation implies not only new opportunities for reach and responsiveness but also systemic exposure to exclusion, data bias, and concentration of market power, making governance, design diversity, and equitable access central to future resilience.

4.8 Youth Unemployment Remains High

Youth unemployment remains a persistent structural challenge in the EU. In 2020, the unemployment rate for those aged 15–24 exceeded 15% across the EU-27, and reached nearly twice that level in parts of Southern and Eastern

Europe (European Commission 2023: 17). Nearly 18% of 20–34-year-olds were neither in employment, education, nor training (NEETs), with rates approaching 30 % in Italy. Although NEET levels have fallen since 2011, many young people continue to enter the labour market through temporary, low-paid, and insecure jobs that often serve as mobility traps rather than stepping-stones (European Commission 2023: 17). These conditions expose young workers to higher risks of exploitation, unstable income, and limited access to contribution-based benefits, undermining their long-term financial security. Beyond material hardship, rising precarity and uncertainty contribute to declining mental well-being and a sense of disconnection from collective futures. For social protection systems, persistently high youth unemployment signals growing pressure on activation, training, and early-intervention measures needed to secure equitable entry into the labour market and prevent lasting social and fiscal scars.

4.9 Ongoing Migration

Migration, both within and into Europe, continues to reshape demographic and economic structures, influencing labour supply, regional balances, and the financing of social protection (European Commission 2023: 11). Migrant workers play an essential role in basic and care sectors but often remain in insecure employment, exposing welfare systems to new vulnerabilities (European Commission 2023: 11). Efforts to attract skilled immigrants aim to offset ageing and labour shortages, while avoiding "brain drain" in sending regions (European Commission 2023: 11–12). Intra-EU and rural-to-urban mobility accelerate population decline and ageing in peripheral areas, weakening local service provision (European Commission 2023: 12). Climate-related displacement adds further complexity. These intertwined movements make migration a structural rather than temporary phenomenon, intertwining demographic, economic, and geopolitical dimensions. For social protection, they imply rising diversity in entitlements and contribution patterns, stronger regional disparities, and the need for adaptable systems that maintain inclusiveness and fiscal sustainability.

4.10 Erosion of Trust and Administrative Barriers in Welfare Access

Perceptions of fairness, transparency, and accessibility increasingly shape how citizens interact with welfare institutions. Recent research shows that selective or highly conditional benefit systems are linked to lower public trust and weaker perceptions of legitimacy (Mewes 2024). Across Europe, complex eligibility criteria, digital-only interfaces, and fragmented delivery mechanisms continue to create practical and psychological barriers for those most in need. The expansion of digital administration can reduce transaction costs but also heightens inequality in access, as individuals with limited digital literacy or resources are disadvantaged (Palmisano & Sacchi 2024). In this context, interactions between citizens and administrations are often perceived as distant or adversarial, reinforcing feelings of exclusion. For social protection systems, these developments imply widening disparities in benefit take-up and confidence, underscoring that institutional design and accessibility are central to sustaining trust, inclusion, and social cohesion in an increasingly digital welfare state.

5. First- and Second-Order Implications

The ten prioritised trends presented above do not occur in isolation. Each one sets in motion a chain of ripple effects that shape the wider social protection landscape. These dynamics were captured by identifying and discussing the implications through the online survey, expert interviews, and the trend workshop. Related ideas were clustered thematically and structured into first-, second- and third-order effects. This mapping formed the analytical basis for the best-case scenario presented in Chapter 6.

1. **Demographic Change Strains Labour, Pension, and Care Systems**

First-order implications	Second-order implications	Third-order implications
Shrinking labour supply	Labour shortages across all sectors (esp. health, care, STEM, education)	Increased dependency on migrant care workers / Increased need for skilled labour migration
	Labour market tightness and rising wage pressures	Burnout and resistance to longer working lives
	Reduced productivity and economic slowdown	Decline in innovative capacity
	Increased automation/robotics deployment	
	Skill mismatches in labour markets	
	Essential jobs remain unfilled	
	Pressure to extend working lives	
	Need for age-friendly workplaces	
	Reduced tax revenues	
	Increasing political influence of elderly voters slows reforms	
Fewer workers must finance more retirees	Higher fiscal burden per worker	Rising inequality between income groups
	Rising pension expenditure	Increased poverty risk for future retirees
	Rising non-wage labour costs	Intensified debates on intergenerational equity
	Constrained public budgets	
	Pressure to raise retirement age	
	Pension formula adjustments needed / Pressure on contribution-based systems	
	Search for new funding sources (capital market mechanisms)	
	Declining tax revenues and rising expenditures	
	Intergenerational tensions over redistribution (fairness debates, perceived burden on younger cohorts)	Polarisation and declining trust in welfare institutions
	Increased risk of old-age poverty	
Rising demand for health and long-term care	Rising healthcare costs	Two- or three-tier care systems emerge
	Growing pressure on long term care systems	Exclusion of those unable to afford private care
	Increasing unmet care needs; Declining accessibility and quality of care	Health deterioration from postponed treatments
	Need for prevention, rehabilitation, healthy ageing	
	Shift to hybrid/centralised care models	Reduced specialised care provision
	Pressure on formal care providers	
	Increased demand for technology in care (AI, robotics)	
	Essential care jobs remain unfilled	Higher reliance on migrant care workers
	Worsening working conditions in care	
	Welfare spending shifts from social investment to compensatory spending	
Declining family and informal care capacity	Informal care burden concentrated on fewer individuals	Expansion of global care chains ("care drain")
	Increasing care burden on women (double burden)	
	Higher financial strain on families	Growing inequality between households
	Shrinking family networks reduce household-based care	Lower female labour-force participation reduces economic potential

	More elderly people without family support	Greater need for community-based living arrangements
	Increased loneliness among older adults	
	Combined childcare + eldercare pressures intensify	

2. Persistent and Widening Labour Market Divides

First-order implications	Second-order implications	Third-order implications
Growing divide between high- and low-quality jobs	In-work poverty increases	Higher long-term poverty risk
	Precarious work expands (short contracts, involuntary part-time, low hours)	Devaluation of human capital
	Wage stagnation for the bottom 40%	
	Pension entitlements weaken due to unstable careers	
	Skill mismatches deepen	
	High turnover and fragmented job histories	
	Declining upward mobility	
Persistent barriers to labour-market entry for specific groups	Self-reinforcing inequalities ("Matthew effects")	
	Underemployment and non-employment rise among marginalised groups	Lower quality of life for excluded workers
	Discrimination persists (women, migrants, older workers, disabled persons)	Marginalisation and increased crime
	Workplace diversity stagnates	
	Skills deterioration among excluded groups	
	Exclusion negatively affects health and well-being	
Precarious employment weakens access to social protection	Atypical workers receive weaker unemployment, sickness, and pension coverage	Deepening divide between "protected insiders" and "unprotected outsiders"
	Minimum-income protection becomes uneven	Rising long-term poverty among workers with unstable careers
	Welfare systems face added strain from unstable careers	
	Care responsibilities (especially for women) reduce benefit access	
	Increased need for public childcare to support participation	
Labour-market divides weaken social cohesion and democratic resilience	Social tensions increase (ethnic, generational, territorial)	Polarisation between "haves" and "have-nots"; Social integration weakens when it is most needed
	Political unrest and populist pressures intensify	Anti-social behaviours (riots, vandalism) might increase
	Declining trust in welfare institutions	
	Reduced civic engagement and participation	Threats to democratic resilience
	Wealth inequality increases political influence of the wealthy ("rich have too much impact")	

	Lack of meaningful work under-mines belonging and autonomy	

3. Climate Shocks Amplify Social Vulnerabilities

First-order implications	Second-order implications	Third-order implications
More frequent and severe climate shocks	Rising human and economic losses	
	Damaged housing, infrastructure, and livelihoods	
	Desertification and permanent land degradation	Loss of agricultural production; food price inflation
	Certain regions become uninhabitable	
	Temporary displacement and climate migration	Regional instability (North/South, rural/urban, coastal/inland)
	Increased unemployment in affected regions	Social instability
	Water scarcity and "war on water" tensions	Regional instability and geopolitical tensions
	More frequent natural disasters overload local response capacities	
Climate shocks hit vulnerable groups hardest	Increased poverty and widening income inequality	Long-term poverty in vulnerable regions and households
	Low-income groups cannot afford adaptation (cooling, insurance)	
	Children face insufficient nutrition and greater health risks	
	Elderly face lethal heatwaves and limited mobility	
	Climate migration reinforces inequalities in housing and labour markets	
	Increased precarious employment after climate-related job loss	
	Regional winners and losers deepen inequality across Europe	
	Higher health burdens (respiratory, cardiovascular, mental health)	
Growing strain on social protection, insurance, and public systems	Rising insurance costs; reduced affordability of coverage	Entrenched inequality when climate losses remain uninsured
		Increased uninsured losses for households and SMEs
	Need for stronger emergency relief and rapid income support	
	Social protection must scale up activation, mobility support, short-time work schemes	
	Insufficient integration of climate risks into existing social protection schemes	
	Higher demand for re- and upskilling after climate-related job disruption	
	Pressure on welfare budgets ("who pays for losses and compensation?")	

| | Political tensions around universal vs targeted support | |
| | Challenges for regional planning, urban policy, and public infrastructure | |

4. Growth of Fragmented and Precarious Work Arrangements

First-order implications	Second-order implications	Third-order implications
Rise of fragmented work arrangements	Higher income insecurity	
	Need for second jobs to meet basic living costs	
	Growth of working poor	
	Lower-quality working conditions (accident risks, lack of autonomy)	
	Rising physical and mental health issues (stress, instability)	
	Difficulties reconciling work and family life (esp. single parents)	Family instability
	Interrupted or incomplete career development (training gaps, uneven opportunities)	Devaluation of human capital
	Reduced access to services (health, social, educational) due to irregular hours	
	Marginalisation of workers on informal or peripheral contracts	
	Higher income insecurity	
	Need for second jobs to meet basic living costs	
	Growth of working poor	
Individualisation of income and social risks	Greater financial fragility (low savings, low resilience)	
	Long-term instability for self-employed and solo workers	
	Increased poverty risk for underemployed workers	
	Economic and social exclusion intensifies	Political radicalisation
	Housing insecurity grows (unstable incomes, rising costs)	
	Persistent stress and declining mental health	
	Insecurity spills over into family life and community participation	
	Unequal ability to invest in children's education and opportunities	Intergenerational disadvantage
	Widening gaps between secure dual-earner families and precarious households	
Erosion of access to social protection and labour rights	Unequal access to unemployment, sickness, and pension benefits	Entrenched inequality between secure and precarious worker
	Lower pension entitlements ("low to no pension")	
	In-work poverty increases as social protection fails to compensate instability	

	Need to redesign social protection instruments for fragmented careers	
	Deterioration of workers' social rights	
	Sustainability pressures on social protection systems	
	Declining trust in welfare institutions	
	Persistence of insiders vs outsiders in social protection	

5. Climate Policy Costs Intensify Pressure on Low-Income Households

First-order implications	Second-order implications	Third-order implications
Rising living costs from climate policy measures	Higher energy burden for low-income households	
	Heating underconsumption ("heating less than needed")	
	Transport poverty ("fuel vs food" trade-offs)	
	Food cost inflation / rising basic goods prices	Child poverty increases
	Health risks increase (cold homes, heat stress)	Health disparities widen between socio-economic groups
	Rising healthcare costs for vulnerable groups	
	Reduced disposable income & inability to save	
	Increased poverty among low-income families	
	Loss of employment in fossil-intensive sectors	
Unequal ability to adapt to the transition	Inability to invest in home renovation or insulation	
	Delayed or impossible adoption of clean technologies	
	Higher long-term energy costs	
	Gentrification pressures (renovation costs lead to higher rents)	Cities become less socially resilient
	Uneven adaptation between regions ("regional disparities")	
	Growing discrepancies in accessibility and affordability of transport	Social isolation as mobility becomes unaffordable
Regressive cost distribution undermines fairness and cohesion	Perception of climate policies as unfair ("anti–Green Deal sentiment")	
	Loss of trust in politics and institutions	Legitimacy of climate policy weakens
	Frustration leading to political polarisation	Instability of society
	Targeting vs universality debate intensifies	
	Uneven cost-sharing between income groups	
	Rising crime linked to social distress	
	Loss of employment in carbon-intensive industries	Local economic decline

6. Mental Well-being and Health of Children and Adolescents is Declining

First-order implications	Second-order implications	Third-order implications
Increased psychological distress	Suicide risk increases	Long-term intergenerational transmission of mental health problems
	Burden on families rises	
	Social pressure intensifies	
	Mental illness continues into adulthood	
	Crime risk increases	
Social withdrawal & loneliness	Declining trust in others and difficulty forming relationships	
	Breakdown of community support	Social structures weaken
Decline in school functioning	Missed academic opportunities	
	Difficulty transitioning to adulthood	
	Harder to meet job demands later	Long-term productivity losses
	Lower competitiveness / innovation capacity	Loss of societal potential
Decline in skill formation and social skills	Long-term productivity losses	
	Underdeveloped social skills	
Increased risky or harmful behaviours	Crime risk increases	Societal instability
	Institutional exclusion risk	
Increased demand on mental-health, school, and care systems	Overburdened mental-health services	Higher public spending burden
	Pressure on teachers / schools	
	Higher healthcare costs	

7. Digitalisation and AI transform Services and Work

First-order implications	Second-order implications	Third-order implications
Digitalisation changes how services are delivered	Digital tools compensate for labour shortages	
	More personalised services	
	New modes and solutions in education	
	Increased documentation / bureaucracy	
	Service production outside traditional chains	
	Decreasing employment in service sector	
Dependency on digital infrastructure and private platforms increases	Increased dependency on commercial platforms	Long-term dependency on digital giants
	Loss of public control over essential services	Deepening inequalities
	Market power concentration of digital giants	Need for independent digital infrastructure
	Data ownership concerns	
Digital divides widen	Digital exclusion	Increased exclusion of vulnerable groups
	Regional digital divides	Deepening inequalities
	Exclusion hampers participation / engagement	
	Unequal access to digitalised health and social services	
	Need for equitable digital skills	

Algorithmic decision-making re-shapes work and service access	Algorithmic bias	Increased exclusion of vulnerable groups
	One-size-fits-all solutions exclude complex cases	
	Burden on front-line workers handling exceptions	
	Loss of human skills / de-skilling	
	Problems for unionisation (gig economy)	
	Gamification pressures	
Governance, accountability and trust risks increase	Loss of trust when accountability unclear	Erosion of democracy & trust
	Transparency / equality concerns	
	Surveillance / totalitarian risks	Social fragmentation
	Changing underlying welfare-state values	
	Disintegration of communities / localities	Social fragmentation
	Risks to democracy	Erosion of democracy & trust

8. Youth Unemployment Remains High

First-order implications	Second-order implications	Third-order implications
Lack of employment opportunities	Skill mismatch	Loss of human capital
	AI makes entry harder	Permanent labour-market exclusion
	Accepting poor-quality jobs	
	NEET status persists	
Income insecurity and unstable livelihoods	High poverty rates	Risk of crime/extremism/psychiatric issues
	Low income among youth	Migration / brain drain
	Employer abuse	
Disconnection from education/skills pathways	Missed skill development	Loss of human capital
	Inequality in education	Lower long-term competitiveness
	Need for guidance	
	Long-term scarring	
Deteriorating mental well-being	Radicalisation risk	
	Anxiety, hopelessness	Social withdrawal
Weak labour-market integration and exclusion risks	Marginalisation	Permanent exclusion / long-term poverty
	Vulnerability cascades	
Strain on social systems	Higher training needs	Fiscal strain (via social assistance pressure)
	Pressure on social assistance	
	Access problems to social security	
Delayed transitions to adulthood	Delayed family formation	Demographic consequences in ageing Europe
	Lower fertility due to insecurity	
	Difficulties in emancipation	

9. Ongoing Migration

First-order implications	Second-order implications	Third-order implications
Labour mobility reshapes workforce composition	Influences demographics and employment	Shifts in global/regional power dynamics
	Relieves labour shortages	
	Migration essential in ageing Europe	

	Migrants contribute taxes	
	Brain drain harms sending regions	
Migrants fill essential roles but face precarious work	Precarious employment and exploitation	
	Migrant resentment	Long-term care pressures
	Dualisation of labour market	
	Employer abuse / informal sector	
	Ageing migrant workers will need care	
Growing diversity in societies	More religious/cultural diversity	
	Need for inclusiveness and tolerance	New perspectives on diversity needed
	Citizen vs. non-citizen divisions	
Strain on integration and inclusion systems	Integration policies increasingly important	Intergenerational poverty/exclusion
	Pressure on education system	
	Family reunification restrictions marginalise families	
	Lack of inclusion increases social protection pressure	
	Employment gaps for migrant women	
Political conflict and polarisation around migration	Migration framed as social problem	Erosion of social cohesion
	Far-right exploitation	More social conflicts / protests
		Racist politics hinder attraction
	Anti-migrant sentiments	
	Politicisation affects rights	
	Integration perceived as failure	
Regional disparities deepen	Urban strain and overcrowding	Viability threats to rural services
	Rural decline and ageing	Urban inequality / segregation
	Regional economic divides grow	
Implications for social protection financing	Ageing migrant workforce pressures pensions and care	
	Tension between skilled vs. refugee migration	
	Low-skilled migration	Public finance load

10. Erosion of Trust and Administrative Barriers in Welfare Access

First-order implications	Second-order implications	Third-order implications
Declining trust in welfare institutions	Trust in politicians down	Erosion of democracy
		Tensions between citizens & state
	Misinformation & mistrust	Radicalisation / far-right shift
	Political disengagement	
	Erosion of rule of law	
Administrative barriers hinder access	People ask for help too late	Widening inequality & poverty
	Digital-by-default barriers	Digital marginalisation loops
	Vulnerable groups "stay behind"	
	Barriers worse for migrants	
	Tighter eligibility criteria	
	Third-sector intermediaries gain influence	
	Hard-to-access digital entry points	Deepened digital divide
	Pressure to join up digital health/social care	

Adversarial welfare interactions	Social protection viewed as contribution-based "savings"	Risky behaviours (crime, poor health, precarious work)
	Claimant–provider conflict	Decline of solidarity/universalism
	Welfare gaming	
	Feeling monitored/controlled	
	Distrust in service quality/resourcing	

6. Best-case Scenario for the Future of Social Protection Systems and Essential Services

The implications identified in the previous step were synthesised into a best-case scenario for 2040. By clustering related effects into four overarching themes, the analysis outlines how Europe's social protection systems and essential services could evolve under favourable conditions. The scenario does not predict the future; rather, it describes a desirable and achievable direction of travel that reflects the validated trends and their implications. It serves as a foundation for the subsequent backcasting exercise (see Chapter 7), which will focus on the actions, stakeholders, and enabling conditions needed to move toward this future.

6.1 Income Security and Inclusive Labour Market Participation

By 2040, Europe's social protection systems provide more reliable income security across the life course, even as demographic change and labour market fragmentation continue to shape work trajectories. Coverage gaps for people in non-standard, intermittent, or platform-based employment have narrowed, and benefit adequacy has improved for groups that previously faced higher poverty risks, including young adults, migrants, and single parents. These developments reduce long-standing divides between labour market "insiders" and "outsiders," while acknowledging that pressures on fiscal sustainability remain. Improvements in minimum-income protection and more stable pension adequacy for workers with fragmented careers have reduced long-term poverty risks identified in the trend analysis.

Employment support has become more accessible and better aligned with the needs of jobseekers. Guidance, training, and early intervention help limit long-term scarring among young adults and reduce exclusion risks for groups that previously struggled to enter or remain in the labour market. Earlier interventions support young people during the transition from education to work, while measures addressing care- and health-related constraints have improved participation among women and older workers.

Income protection and employment support are better coordinated, enabling individuals to maintain a decent standard of living during periods of job loss, training, illness, or care duties. This reduces the risk of repeated spells of insecure work combined with inadequate benefit access. Social policies are increasingly recognised as investments that strengthen social cohesion and economic resilience.

Across Member States, there is greater exchange of practices and more aligned approaches to monitoring adequacy, accessibility, and activation outcomes. While systems remain diverse, cooperation has improved collective capacity to respond to shared demographic, labour market, and social challenges.

6.2 Shock-Responsive and Climate-Fair Social Protection

By 2040, Europe's social protection systems respond more effectively to climate shocks and transition-related pressures. Emergency income support, housing assistance, and health services reach affected households more reliably, reducing the risk that short-term disruption turns into long-term poverty or exclusion.

The unequal impact of climate-policy costs on low-income households has lessened. Support measures help manage higher energy, transport, and food costs, and more transparent redistribution reduces perceptions of unfair burden-sharing. Earlier problems such as transport poverty, heating underconsumption, and limited ability to invest in energy-efficient alternatives are less severe, though not fully resolved.

Regions repeatedly exposed to climate risks or long-term economic decline receive more predictable support. Climate considerations are better integrated into social protection, helping prevent regional disparities from deepening and reducing the likelihood that shocks produce lasting vulnerability.

Stronger links between social protection and labour markets help workers affected by climate-related job loss. Re- and upskilling needs are identified earlier, and public employment services cooperate more closely with local actors, limiting risks of prolonged unemployment or exclusion.

Overall, systems remain under pressure, but they are more capable of preventing climate shocks and transition costs from widening inequality or eroding trust.

6.3 Human-Centred Digitalisation of Social Protection and Essential Services

By 2040, digitalisation and AI support more accessible and reliable social protection and essential services without reinforcing existing inequalities. Digital tools are used to simplify procedures, reduce waiting times, and improve case handling, while hybrid channels remain available for those with limited digital skills or unstable access to technology.

Earlier risks of exclusion, particularly for low-income households, migrants, older adults, and people facing complex needs, have been reduced. Investments in digital skills and accessible design help prevent digital-by-default approaches from creating new barriers, and regional disparities in digital infrastructure have narrowed.

Algorithmic decision-making is more transparent and accountable. Systems include checks for bias and provide clear routes for human review in complex cases, reducing concerns about opaque or one-size-fits-all automation. Dependency on commercial platforms has lessened as more services run on secure public infrastructure with clearer safeguards on data ownership and privacy.

Remote healthcare, digital social-protection solutions, and integrated data systems function more effectively, improving outreach and continuity of support, especially in rural or understaffed areas. At the same time, front-line workers retain discretion in cases where digital tools are insufficient, helping maintain trust in service quality.

These developments do not eliminate all risks associated with rapid digitalisation, but they make systems more responsive, equitable, and reliable. Digital transformation strengthens, rather than weakens, the relationship between citizens and welfare institutions.

6.4 Trustworthy, Coordinated, and Inclusive Welfare Governance

By 2040, welfare institutions in Europe operate with greater transparency and clearer access pathways, helping to counter the distrust and frustration that had built up around complex eligibility rules and digital-by-default systems. Administrative barriers have been reduced through simpler procedures, more consistent information, and support for people who previously delayed seeking help or struggled to navigate fragmented services. Earlier issues of non-take-up linked to complex procedures and digital-only access have declined, as administrations proactively guide applicants through entitlements and reach out to individuals who previously disengaged due to stigma, low trust, or uncertainty about eligibility.

Fairness and accountability are more visible in how benefits are designed and implemented. Measures that previously reinforced the gap between "protected insiders" and "unprotected outsiders" have been adjusted, and access problems for groups facing discrimination (such as migrants, older workers, and people with disabilities) have become less pronounced. Although inequalities persist, fewer people experience welfare interactions as adversarial or exclusionary.

Cooperation across levels of government has improved. While social protection remains a national competence, Member States exchange more practices on adequacy, accessibility, and take-up, helping limit widening territorial disparities and supporting more consistent standards of protection. This alignment is not uniform, but it strengthens collective capacity to address shared demographic, labour-market, and climate-related pressures.

Participation in policy design has also widened. Representatives of workers, employers, civil society organisations, and vulnerable groups contribute more systematically to reforms, and evidence from research institutions is used more regularly to evaluate outcomes. These shifts help address legitimacy concerns and reduce perceptions that welfare systems are distant, unfair, or unresponsive.

Overall, governance remains under strain from political polarisation and fiscal pressures, yet institutions are more inclusive, coordinated, and trusted than before. These improvements make social protection better equipped to uphold cohesion and support populations in a period of rapid change.

7. Next steps: Backcasting

Following the completion of all four foresight cycles, we will initiate the next major phase of the process: Translating the developed trend insights and scenarios into steps for developing knowledge, innovative solutions and strategic policy options at European, national, and regional level. This will take place in a backcasting workshop, currently planned for January 2026, which will bring together experts from across disciplines and sectors.

The workshop will start from the four desirable best-case scenarios developed for each impact area. Using the widely established approach of backcasting, participants will work backwards from these desirable futures to today, systematically identifying the necessary steps, enabling conditions, and interventions needed to move towards the envisioned futures. The guiding question will be: What kind of future is imaginable and desirable in each impact area and how can we work strategically towards achieving it?

Backcasting is an approach that starts by defining a desirable and plausible future scenario. It should be ambitious enough to inspire innovation, but realistic enough that concrete pathways can be identified to reach it. Choosing a preferred scenario helps focus attention on what stakeholders want to achieve, rather than merely reacting to what seems most probable. Starting with a bold scenario encourages more creative thinking, while keeping the steps needed to achieve it grounded and actionable. Backcasting is not about ignoring potential problems; rather, it focuses on overcoming obstacles in a proactive, solution-oriented way, even in the face of uncertainty.

This method allows us to focus not only on what is likely, but on what is possible and desirable, helping to formulate proactive, solution-oriented pathways even in the face of uncertainty. Starting from a bold but plausible scenario encourages all stakeholders to think creatively, while maintaining a realistic view on the steps and conditions needed to achieve these outcomes. Rather than ignoring challenges, the backcasting approach explicitly addresses obstacles, fostering a strategic and action-oriented mindset.

The action steps developed through this process will provide a strong evidence base for the formulation of the SRIA for the European Partnership on Social Transformations and Resilience. Through its innovative Strategic Foresight approach, the SRIA will provide a framework for issues and activities not only for the short and medium term, but also for the long term, allowing for changing needs and iterations.

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ANNEX

Long list of 25 Trends

The Future of Social Cohesion: How Demographic and Social Shifts are Redefining Vulnerability and Welfare Demands

Demographic ageing, shrinking households, migration and changing care requirements are redefining vulnerability and the way support is provided. Meanwhile, rising housing insecurity, emerging forms of poverty and increasing distrust of welfare systems are calling into question traditional models of solidarity and access.

1. **Demographic Ageing and Fertility Decline:** Europe's population is ageing due to longer life expectancy and persistently low birth rates. The number of people aged 75+ is projected to rise from 43.8 million in 2020 to 75.4 million in 2050, while fertility has fallen from 2.4 children per woman in 1970 to 1.5 in 2020. These shifts shrink the future workforce, strain pension and care systems, and raise concerns about intergenerational balance.

2. **Ongoing Migration:** Migration continues to reshape Europe's demographics and labour markets. Essential services rely heavily on migrant workers, yet their jobs remain precarious. The EU increasingly seeks to attract skilled immigrants to offset ageing and labour shortages, while intra-EU mobility and rural–urban migration deepen regional disparities. These dynamics demand inclusive social protection and integration policies to prevent long-term exclusion and support welfare sustainability.

3. **Smaller Households:** Household sizes are shrinking across the EU. In 2021, Scandinavian Member States and Germany recorded the lowest figures, with household sizes ranging between 1.8 and 2.0. Smaller households, especially single-parent families (mostly mothers), face heightened economic and emotional vulnerability, necessitating tailored support. Child poverty is disproportionately high in these structures. This shift requires individualised social protection entitlements, moving beyond family-based approaches.

4. **Growing Pressure on Care Systems:** Europe's ageing population, shrinking family sizes, and changing gender roles are increasing demand for formal care services, i.e. long-term, elderly, and child care. At the same time, many Member States face growing shortages of care workers, especially in rural areas. These shortages risk undermining access and quality, especially for low-income households and those with complex care needs.

5. **Rising Homelessness and Housing Insecurity:** Housing across the EU has become significantly less affordable, with tenants now spending 31% of their income on rent and nearly half fearing they may lose their home. At the same time, homelessness has risen by an estimated 70% over the past decade, affecting around 700,000 people in 2021. These developments reflect growing housing insecurity, particularly among young people and those with limited resources.

6. **New Forms of Poverty Emerging:** Poverty in Europe is becoming more complex and multidimensional, shaped by intersecting factors such as age, gender, health, migration status, and digital access. New forms like energy and transport poverty are gaining relevance, while many people face exclusion from services despite not being income-poor. Traditional poverty metrics often fail to capture these evolving patterns of social vulnerability.

7. **Child Poverty is Increasing in Most EU Countries:** In 2023, 24.2% of children in the EU were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Although the EU average declined slightly, child poverty rose in 17 Member States. The highest rates were recorded in Bulgaria (35.1%), Spain (34.6%), and Romania (33.8%), pointing to a persistent and uneven pattern across the EU.

8. **Well-being and Health of Children and Adolescents is Declining:** Mental health among children and adolescents in the EU has deteriorated, with rising rates of mental illness, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Girls report poorer mental well-being than boys, with a more pronounced decline over time. Long-term data from countries like Sweden indicate a steady increase in mental distress over recent decades.

9. **Erosion of Trust and Administrative Barriers in Welfare Access:** Perceptions of fairness, transparency, and accessibility play a growing role in how people interact with social protection systems. Complex procedures, digital-only access, or inconsistent eligibility criteria can erode trust. In some Member States, non-take-up of benefits is rising, not due to lack of need, but due to perceived or actual barriers to access.

The Future of Labour Market Structures: How Flexibility, Fragmentation, and Risk Are Evolving

The world of work is undergoing a profound transformation, driven by demographic trends, technological advancements, the green transition, and globalisation. These shifts create extensive social risks for certain forms of work and vulnerable groups, necessitating adaptive social protection measures.

1. **Unequal Access to Employment Persists Despite Overall Growth:** Despite rising overall employment in the EU, significant gaps remain for vulnerable groups such as young people, women, older workers, migrants, and persons with disabilities. These groups continue to face barriers to accessing stable, quality employment. Their persistent under-employment contributes to structural labour market inequalities across Member States.

2. **Rising Employment Among Older Workers:** The employment rate of people aged 55–64 in the EU rose from under 40% in the early 2000s to nearly 60% by 2020. This trend is driven by rising retirement ages and the phasing out of early-retirement schemes. It is expected to continue as part of broader efforts to adapt to population ageing.

3. **Youth Unemployment Remains High:** In 2020, the EU youth unemployment rate (ages 15–24) exceeded 15%, with much higher levels in parts of Southern and Eastern Europe. Nearly 18% of 20–34-year-olds were not in employment, education, or training (NEETs), reaching almost 30% in Italy. Many young people remain stuck in insecure, low-paid jobs, signalling persistent labour market exclusion.

4. **Persisting Gender Gaps in Employment and Earnings:** Women in the EU continue to face lower employment rates and earnings compared to men, especially after early motherhood. Part-time underemployment remains common among women, and the broader gender earnings gap persists. Gender inequalities in labour force participation and earnings continue to limit women's economic autonomy and weaken the long-term fairness and adequacy of social protection.

5. **Expansion of Telework and Hybrid Work Models:** The share of EU employees regularly working from home rose from 5% pre-pandemic to 12% during the 2020 lockdown, and remains well above pre-crisis levels. Hybrid work models are becoming the norm in many white-collar sectors. This shift is reshaping work routines, blurring boundaries between work and private life, and contributing to new forms of labour market segmentation.

6. **Evolving Forms of Work:** Non-standard employment now accounts for 40% of jobs in the EU, including part-time, temporary, self-employment, and platform work. These forms increasingly blur traditional job classifications and expose workers to fragmented careers and income insecurity. In 2021, 7.5 million people held second jobs, and 68% of the self-employed were 'solo' workers, highlighting the growing individualisation of risk. Evolving work forms require social protection systems to adapt to multiple jobs and employers, posing challenges for unemployment, sickness, and disability benefits.

7. **Growth of Fragmented and Precarious Work Arrangements:** Work in the EU is becoming increasingly fragmented. Around 20% of workers are employed part-time – over 50% in the NL, for example – and second jobs are becoming increasingly common, particularly in high-income Member States. Solo self-employment now accounts for 68% of all self-employment and is often associated with limited social protection. These changes reflect an increasing individualisation of risk and a shift away from stable, full-time employment.

8. **Widening Labour Market Inequality:** Inequality within the labour market is growing across the EU. Low-paid and low-quality jobs remain widespread, particularly among young, low-skilled, and migrant workers. In 2018, 15.2% of workers were classified as low-paid, with wage growth for the bottom 40% consistently falling behind national averages. Declining opportunities for upward mobility reinforce structural divides in income and job quality.

The Future of Welfare Systems in a Digital and Green Age: How the twin transition is reshaping services, jobs, and inequalities

The green and digital transitions are reshaping both the economy and the welfare state. While digital platforms and green sectors offer new opportunities, they also introduce new divides in access, skills, and resilience that social protection must urgently adapt to.

1. **Rising Frequency and Impact of Climate-Related Extremes:** Climate-related extreme events are becoming more frequent and severe across Europe. Annual damages already exceed EUR 12 billion, with major events in 2021 likely raising this further. These shocks increase health risks, damage infrastructure, and heighten the vulnerability of people in precarious conditions, making societies more exposed to sudden disruptions.

2. **Climate Impacts Deepen Social Vulnerability:** As floods, droughts, and heatwaves increase across Europe, their effects fall disproportionately on vulnerable populations. People with limited resources are more likely to live in risk-prone areas and face greater challenges in accessing healthcare, housing, and insurance. Climate change is amplifying existing social inequalities and putting low-income groups at heightened risk.

3. **Climate Policy Costs Intensify Pressure on Low-Income Households:** Climate mitigation measures, e.g. carbon pricing and energy regulations, are increasing costs for heating, transport, and food. Low-income households are disproportionately affected, as they spend a larger share of their income on essentials and face barriers to adopting energy-efficient alternatives. This growing 'transition burden' risks reinforcing existing social inequalities.

4. **Green Transition Reshapes Regional and Sectoral Employment:** The shift to climate neutrality is transforming employment across the EU. While green sectors like renewable energy and sustainable mobility are growing, fossil-based industries are in decline. The employment impact varies regionally, with areas reliant on high-carbon industries facing higher risks of structural unemployment.

5. **Growth of Employment in Green Sectors:** Employment in the EU's environmental economy grew by 43% between 2000 and 2019, with jobs in renewable energy more than doubling. By 2019, green sectors accounted for 2.2% of total employment, with the highest shares in Finland, Estonia, and Austria. New roles are also emerging in organic agriculture and nature conservation.

6. **Ongoing Job Polarisation in the EU:** Since the mid-1990s, EU labour markets have seen a decline in routine mid-skill jobs and growth in both high- and low-skill employment. This polarisation is expected to continue, with job losses in areas like skilled manual work and gains in care, sales, and high-skill roles. ICT skills and task complexity are becoming more important across occupations.

7. **Digitalisation Reinforces Labour Market Inequalities:** Digitalisation is deepening existing labour market divides. Groups with lower education levels, limited digital skills, disabilities, or migrant backgrounds face greater barriers to adapting to technological change. The pandemic exposed unequal access to digital tools for work and learning, leaving many working-age adults at risk of exclusion in a digitalising economy.

8. **Digitalisation Reshapes Service Delivery:** Digital technologies are reshaping the delivery of essential services across Europe. Platform-based models reduce transaction costs and allow rapid scaling, making services like health apps, e-learning, and digital mobility widely accessible. Public authorities are increasingly adopting digital

tools to expand reach and responsiveness, especially in underserved areas. This shift marks a fundamental transformation in how social, health, and public services are structured and accessed.

Futures Wheel Template
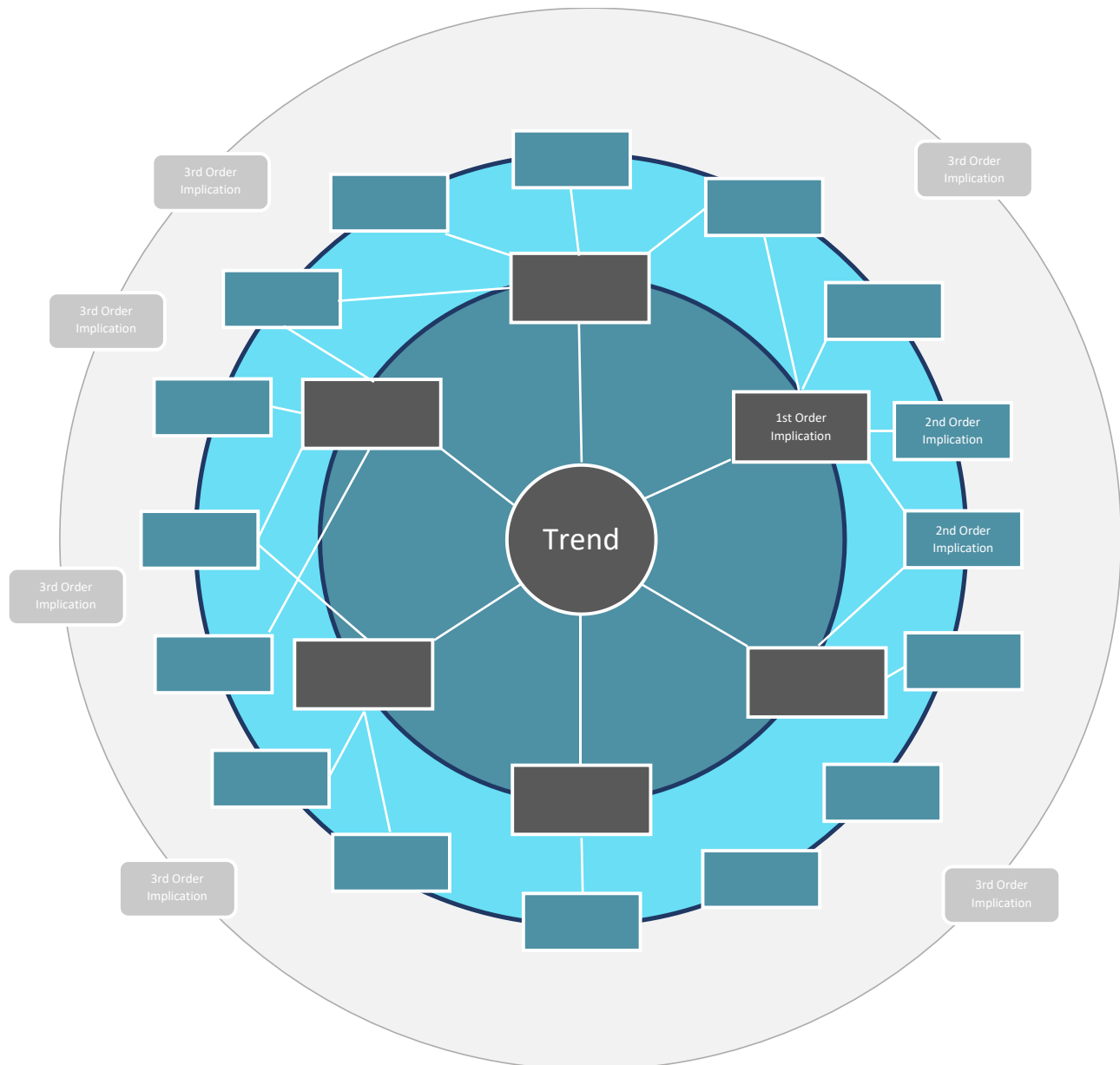
Expert Interview Guideline – Social Protection & Essential Services

1. Introduction

- Duration & Structure: Interview will last 30–60 minutes, covering:
  o General perspective on the Future of Work
  o Trend validation and refinement
  o Implications for future research
  o Closing & next steps

2. General Perspective on the Future of Social Protection Systems

- What do you perceive the most significant shifts shaping the future of social protection systems in Europe?
- Imagine it's ten years from now: What scenarios do you see unfolding regarding the Future of social protection systems?

- Are there any important trends we may have overlooked?
- Have you observed any counter-trends or unexpected/surprising developments?
- What's not yet on most people's radar but should be? Could you highlight any emerging or weak signals that may not yet be widely discussed?

3. Trend Validation and Refinement

Trend #1 & #2 & #3 (chosen by you as expert): Respective questions for each of the selected trends:

- To what extent do you agree with the trend?
- Is this trend accurate and relevant from your perspective?
- Is it overestimated, underestimated, or missing nuances?

4. Implications for Future Research

- How should research in Social Sciences and Humanities address these trends?
- What research priorities do you see to respond to these trends? Where do you see the most critical knowledge gaps?

5. Closing & Follow-up

- Is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't covered?
- Is there anything you should've asked that you didn't?
- Can you name additional experts, who we could contact to interview or engage in the Foresight process?
- Follow-up: Would you be open to reviewing preliminary findings or participating in future discussions?
- Next steps