

D2.3

Towards sustainable wellbeing: What do we know about the potential role of social services?

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Disclaimer

This deliverable is part of Task 2.2 “Assess the role of social services in promoting the transition: A literature review” of Work Package 2. This Task aims at systematically reviewing the literature (conducted following structured procedure such as the PRISMA methodology) and at asking what existing scientific knowledge teaches us about the potential role of social services in the transition towards sustainable wellbeing.

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Executive Summary

The climate crisis poses a series of urgent challenges for public policies, and it is increasingly seen as vital to find ways to achieve global ecological sustainability while ensuring human well-being for all. In Europe, the welfare state – with social protection and social services as the two core pillars – plays a pivotal role in these debates. Deliverable 2.3 focuses on social services and their potential role in the green transition. Based on a systematic review, the report maps and synthesises the scattered and fragmented pieces of existing theoretical knowledge and empirical evidence the literature offers. The study discusses what the literature says about three research questions: Which social services are considered useful in a socio-ecological perspective? Which goals or priorities in policy design and principles of award should underpin future eco-social services? How should social services be organised and with what motivations? The report also tries to identify concrete empirical examples of eco-social services from across Europe.

The systematic review identified 36 relevant contributions but found no consensus on which services are most useful or relevant for the transition towards ecological sustainability (RQ1). However, there however seems to be near consensus around the policy design and principles of award (RQ2). Services should be universal and focus on covering basic needs. In contrast, little is said about how services should be organised (RQ3). Only two of the reviewed studies analysed ongoing, bottom-up eco-social initiatives related to social services.

The report concludes that scholarship on “eco-social” services is emerging but is still in its infancy. Overall, two findings stand out. First, the eco-social policy literature lacks a shared concept of social services and in practice collapses the category into universal basic services. Therefore, the literature would, benefit from a stronger consensus on which services belong to this field of study and from engaging more explicitly with traditional debates in social policy scholarship. Second, the ecological benefits attributed to universal social services are largely assumed rather than empirically tested and, hence, better data and more empirical research would bring the field forward.

Keywords: Social services; sustainable wellbeing; universal basic services; green transition, human need; welfare state; literature review

1. Introduction

1.1. Welfare institutions, economic growth and sustainable wellbeing

The climate crisis poses a series of urgent challenges and conundrums for the welfare state and public policy more generally. From a global perspective, the key challenge is to find ways to achieve global ecological sustainability while ensuring human well-being for all. In Europe, social protection systems and social services play a pivotal role in this process as institutions that can support citizens through periods of structural transformation by cushioning socially adverse consequences. However, in the 21st century European welfare states are faced with a paradox. On the one hand, they confront 'green social risks' caused by climate change and ecological imbalances. Green social risks refer to social risks emerging from direct climate change effects and other environmental damages or indirectly via environmental policy including climate mitigation and adaptation efforts (Zimmermann, 2024). These include the risk of adverse health conditions due to extreme temperatures, wildfires, displacement caused by extreme weather, regressive effects of fuel taxes or increased home insurance premiums related to surging costs of climate-related damages, to mention only a few examples.

On the other hand, contemporary welfare institutions rely on continued growth in their gross domestic product (GDP) to fund the social services and benefits European citizens expect and sometimes vocally demand (Bailey, 2015; Walker et al., 2021). This is problematic since economic growth is inexorably linked to increases in the use of materials and energy, which in turn produce greenhouse gas emissions and further environmental pressures underlying the accelerating global climate and biodiversity crises. Therefore, to meet sustainability goals economic activity must be decoupled from adverse ecological implications in absolute terms. By definition, absolute decoupling means that the use of material resources and emissions decline even if there is continued GDP growth. In contrast, what some scholars have referred to as 'genuine green growth' requires that absolute decoupling happens at a sufficient pace to keep the economy within planetary boundaries (Rockström et al., 2009; Steffen et al., 2015; Stoknes and Rockström, 2018). In Raworth's famous 'doughnut' model, which emerged as an influential extension of the planetary boundaries framework, the inner circle of the doughnut corresponds to the social foundation. That is, the inner space at the centre can be thought of as a social floor and signifies a state of critical human deprivation and shortfalls in wellbeing, associated with inadequate access to essential resources. While the inner circle represents a social floor, below which no human beings should fall, the outer circle of the doughnut is the ecological ceiling, above which the pressure on life-supporting Earth-system processes is considered increasingly uncertain and dangerous (Steffen et al., 2015). The area defined by the inner and outer boundaries of the doughnut, represent a safe operating space for human wellbeing (Raworth, 2012, 2017).

Notably, there is no scientific agreement about the prospects of achieving absolute decoupling of economic growth from the use of energy and material resources within a time frame that does not exceed the rapidly narrowing window of opportunity (Kallis et al., 2025; Wiedenhofer et al., 2020). In disciplines like sustainability science and ecological economics there are strong warnings and a great deal of scepticism against the conviction that continued prioritisation of economic growth as a core objective (Hickel and Kallis, 2020; see also European Environment Agency, 2021). Instead these literatures frequently call for postgrowth perspectives that put human wellbeing, sufficiency, equity and ecological sustainability at the centre (Vogel and Hickel, 2023). Together these concepts underpin the idea of sustainable wellbeing, which Gough (2017a: 12), in a straightforward definition, describes as 'wellbeing for all current peoples as well as for future generations.' Linking the notions of GDP and wellbeing, a core argument is that GDP is not an adequate proxy for human wellbeing or prosperity and should be replaced with broader conceptualisations of wellbeing like human flourishing, the good life or other notions that are less connected to material living standards (Büchs and Koch, 2017; Gough, 2019; O'Neill et al., 2018).

Connecting the above discussion to policymaking in the European Union (EU), it is worth pointing out that the dominant paradigm is one that is still highly centred on economic growth as a fundamental parameter of



prosperity and progress. Crucially, the EU adheres to a narrative of green growth, represented by an optimistic outlook on the possibility of absolute decoupling at a pace that meets the commitments of the Paris Agreement, (Talenti, 2025). In fact, EU flagship policy roadmaps like the European Green Deal and the Clean Industrial Deal are presented as growth strategies. The former explicitly articulates an ambition of decoupling, aiming to ‘transform the EU into a [...] competitive economy [...] where economic growth is decoupled from resource use’ (European Commission, 2019). In the latter, decarbonisation and climate action more broadly are framed as tools to enhance the international economic competitiveness and strategic autonomy of the EU in a more insecure and unstable geopolitical context (Wendler, 2026). The Clean Industrial Deal policy roadmap concludes that ‘[p]utting decarbonisation and circularity at the heart of our economic policy is the only way for the EU to keep up with resource rich competitors’, suggesting that ‘decarbonisation [is] a driver of economic growth and prosperity, opening new avenues for Europeans’ (European Commission, 2025).

In the area of social policy, key strategic roadmaps such as the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) (European Commission. Secretariat General, 2017) and the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan (European Commission, 2021) embrace economic growth in a similar fashion. The EPSR rests on a narrative of ‘inclusive and sustainable growth’ and ‘competitiveness’. It can be interpreted as a continuation and institutional consolidation of the social investment approach of the 2010s, which built on an idea of social policies ‘as a productive factor, essential to economic development and to employment growth’ (Morel et al., 2011: 2; see also Bokhorst et al., 2026). Social services, broadly conceived, represents a cornerstone in the social investment perspective. In this regard, Hemerijck and Bokhorst (2026: 8, 24) describe a long-term trend of transition towards ‘capacitating social services’ together with a ‘relative reduction in the weight of large transfer-based welfare spending provisions’ across Europe. Relevant to note here is that while Europe has seen an expansion of the former, conceptualised by Hemerijck and Bokhorst (2026: 14) as ‘education, care and employment mediation’, social services complement rather than substitute compensatory cash benefits.

1.2. Research focus

Departing from the described backdrop, this report focuses on social services and their potential role in the green transition. Not only are they considered fundamental in the social investment perspective. They are also frequently promoted in the literature on sustainable welfare and sustainable wellbeing as potentially instrumental in shaping a future welfare state that does not undermine ecological sustainability (e.g., Gough, 2019; Vogel et al., 2021). However, their role in the transition to ecologically sustainable welfare states has not been studied systematically. Theoretical arguments about the avenues through which they could contribute to sustainability transitions and a future welfare state that promote societal and individual welfare and wellbeing within planetary boundaries have been developed mostly outside or at the margins of international scholarship on the welfare state. Similarly, there is scarce empirical evidence of services that pursue and serve an ecological and social agenda in parallel. The aim of this report is to contribute to the eco-social policy and sustainable welfare literature by beginning to fill this gap. Based on a systematic review, employing a structured PRISMA approach (Peters et al., 2015), our objective is to map and synthesise the scattered and fragmented pieces of existing theoretical knowledge and empirical evidence the literature offers.

The study investigates which social services are relevant for the transition to a welfare state premised on ecological sustainability and what they should look like in terms of quality, availability and organisation.

More specifically, to address this overarching question we structure the review around three sets of secondary research questions.

1. Which social services are considered useful in a socio-ecological perspective, i.e., they synergistically serve both social and ecological objectives or social purposes with no or minimal ecological costs?
2. Which goals or priorities in policy design (e.g., paid employment, income adequacy, sufficiency, economic redistribution, needs satisfaction, wellbeing) and principles of award (e.g. universality, reciprocity) should underpin future eco-social services?
3. How should social services be organised and with what motivations?

Addressing these questions, allows us to identify arguments about policy changes required to make the institutional landscape more compatible with a socio-ecological (aka eco-social) policy agenda that places the goal of sustainable wellbeing instead of economic growth at the centre.

In the second part of the review, drawing on findings from the reviewed literature, we turn our attention to policies and practices that are already in place. We scan the included studies for concrete empirical examples of eco-social services, i.e. services that are explicitly designed to foster wellbeing while keeping within planetary boundaries. We find that only a couple of studies actually identify and discuss innovative eco-social initiatives. Neither of these present examples of activities we would typically call social services. However, while the policy examples are far from fully fledged eco-social services, some of them may represent promising steps on the way to developing services that strengthen rather than undermine the eco-social policy agenda. In the conclusion, we offer some reflections and recommendations in response to the question of which types of formal and informal social services the EU and national governments should promote as instruments for advancing the transition.

To start with, even in the absence of a clear-cut answer, we must address the question of definitions. What are 'social services'? As a preliminary observation we note that there is no single, unambiguous definition of social services. Coote and Percy (2020: 4, note 1) point out that a 'formal definition of a 'service', as distinct from a 'good', is a type of activity that is intangible, is not stored, does not result in ownership and is used at the point of delivery' (Coote and Percy, 2020: 4, note 1). The European Commission has emphasised that the nature of social services is context dependent, stating that

[t]he availability, quality and organisation of social services vary significantly within societies [...]. These elements are intrinsically connected to fundamental questions of values, culture, constitutional traditions, and economy [and] a particular definition of 'social services' is dependent on its context' (European Commission: Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion et al., 2022: 48)

We suggest that this is a useful starting point for thinking about social services that are bounded by a condition of environmental sustainability. It follows that, since our research questions are more exploratory than theory-driven, we deliberately did not incorporate a specific definition of social services in the selection criteria for the literature review. However, in the discussion we return with some reflections on which services and design priorities should be considered essential or most relevant in the transition to sustainable models of welfare provision.

Analogous to direct and indirect implications of climate change for well-being and social risks (Gough et al., 2008), in our analysis of the way social services might act as promoters and facilitators of green (or ecologically sustainable) welfare systems, we argue that it is useful to distinguish between direct and indirect 'eco-social' benefits of social services. The former applies to social services that are likely to produce direct ecological benefits like reductions in household energy consumption or car use. Indirect eco-social benefits would arise from social services that are designed, first and foremost, with a social purpose in mind but that indirectly benefit ecologically desirable outcomes by making the social costs of environmental or climate policy more acceptable and easier to bear for socially vulnerable populations.

This distinction resonates also with how the notion of 'eco-social' policy is used in the literature. A frequently cited definition is the one by Mandelli who conceives of eco-social (or socio-ecological) policies as 'public policies *explicitly* pursuing both environmental and social policy goals in an *integrated* way' (Mandelli, 2022: 340; for a similar but less explicit conceptualisation, see Bohnenberger, 2020). In addition, eco-social policies may refer to bundles or integrated mixes of policy, i.e. "when different policy goals and/or instruments [are] effectively combined" (Domorenok and Trein, 2024: 72). According to this reading, eco-social policies are not restricted to single policy measures that simultaneously address environmental and social objectives. Public policies would be 'eco-social' when a mix of separate policy measures occur in combination as part of a larger, integrated policy package or strategy that aims to achieve both environmental and social objectives at the same time (Domorenok and Trein, 2024). For social services it means that a service that is primarily 'social' in its objectives, may be considered relevant from an 'eco-social' perspective if there is a clearly articulated link to its potential (positive or problematic) role in the green transition. While we are interested in identifying the mechanisms through which social services may facilitate the transition, we must also consider the flipside which means identifying the potential challenges or trade-offs between social and ecological priorities in policy design identified in the literature.



2. Methods

To conduct the scoping review, we took as a starting point the five-step methodological framework developed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005). The five steps are (1) identifying the research questions, (2) identifying relevant studies, (3) selecting studies, (4) charting data and (5) collating, summarising and reporting the results. In the reporting process, we adhere to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) checklist (Peters et al., 2015).

We started with the three research questions outlined in the introduction, highlighting goals and principles of award. The selection of search terms was informed by relevant literature and pilot searches in the databases and was discussed in several rounds before we decided on the search string reported in Table 1. The search consisted of two dimensions that both had to be present. That is, the dimensions were connected with the Boolean operator 'AND' to ensure that at least one term from each of the two dimensions were present in the resulting references. Notably, with the inclusion of a range of search terms associated with social services, we deliberately cast the net widely. We did this to avoid the omission of potentially relevant pieces of literature that addressed policies that could be interpreted as social services even if the authors did not explicitly refer to the notion of social services themselves.

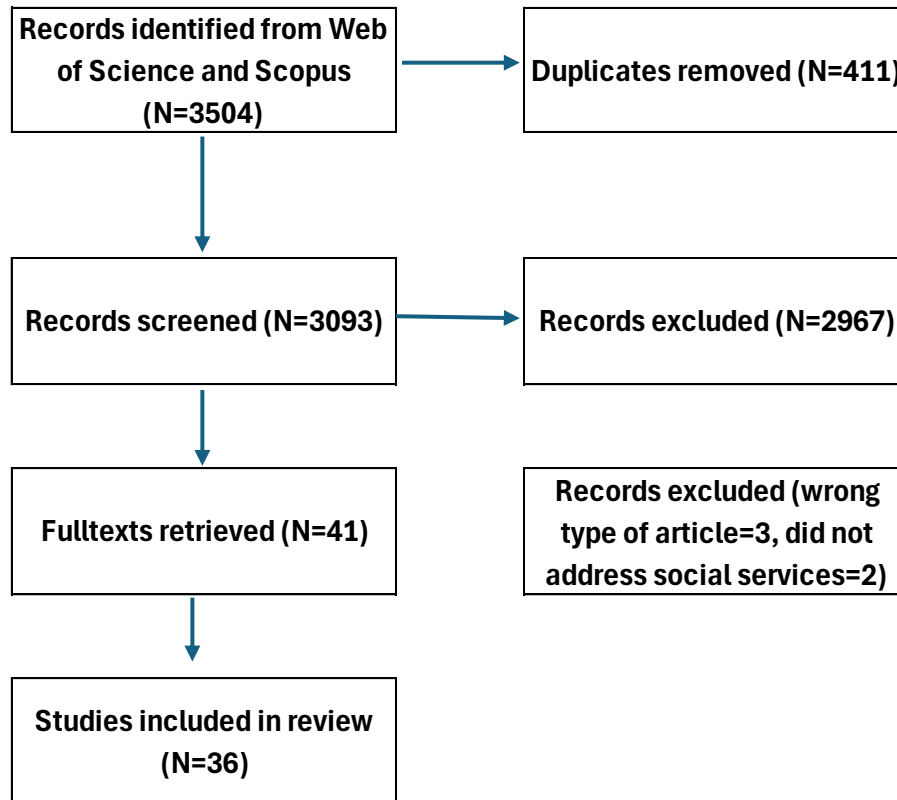
Table 1 Search string

Key dimension	Synonyms
Sustainable welfare	"Eco*social" OR "sustainable well*being" OR "eco*welfare" OR "green transition" OR "socio*ecological" OR "inclusive wellbeing"
Social services	"welfare services" OR "social policy" OR "welfare policy" OR "social investment" OR "justice" OR "well*being" OR "*needs*" OR "essential services" OR "universal basic services" OR "basic income"
Publication date	1 January 2010 – 5 February 2026

Source Authors' elaboration

The literature on eco-social policy cross disciplinary and sectoral boundaries in the research literature (as the results presented below will verify). Therefore, we expected to find studies both in "environmental" or sustainability journals and in social policy /social work-journals. For this reason, we limited the search to the two largest, interdisciplinary search bases: Scopus and Web of Science (for a similar approach, see Fromberg and Lund, 2024). The search, using the string presented in Table 1, yielded 3504 results (figure 1). We used the following inclusion criteria: (1) published between 2010 and February 2026; (2) is published in a peer-reviewed journal or book; (3) set in Europe and discusses EU or (other) European countries; (4) addresses goals and principles of social services; (4) addresses sustainable wellbeing in a way that links "sustainable" to planetary boundaries (rather than financial sustainability or social in isolation); (5) Discusses the role of public policies delivered by state, municipal or third-sector actors to develop services (as opposed to, for instance, informal/family-based care). Applying these criteria, we screened the articles using the online platform Rayyan, which allows for double-blind screening. Both authors screened all articles separately. After the separate screenings, we discussed cases where there was disagreement and reached consensus.

Figure 1 PRISMA flow diagramme



After the screening of titles and abstracts, we identified 41 potentially eligible contributions that proceeded to full-text screening. The retrieved articles (N=41) were assessed independently by both authors against the inclusion criteria. Five were excluded at this stage: three because they were not academic articles but rather short introductions to special issues or similar, and two because they turned out not to discuss social services. After these rounds, we included 36 studies in the review.

Step 4 was to extract relevant information from the 36 articles. Both authors discussed and agreed on a structured data charting form. The form was piloted by one author, who coded a random sample of five articles. After feedback, the form was slightly modified to clarify conceptual definitions, and the remaining contributions were coded. The final charting table includes study characteristics (authors, publication date, countries studied, study design and methods), broad theme (e.g. well-being economy, sustainable benefits, social support for post-growth policies), policy instruments discussed (e.g. UBI, UBS, working time reduction, carbon rationing) and main arguments presented. For the empirical studies included, we paid particular attention to the level of government at which the services discussed were provided (state/national, municipal, third sector).



3. Overview of selected literature

Table 2 gives an overview of the included studies and their characteristics. As an important feature of modern welfare states, it would be reasonable to expect the study of social services to lie within the remit of the disciplines of social policy or social work. Therefore, a first observation is that, perhaps surprisingly, only a few of the selected articles appeared in the most established international social policy or social work journals. Of the 36 contributions we have included, six are books or book chapters, and eleven are published in journals with a strong environmental or sustainability-oriented focus (e.g., *Ecological Economics*, *Sustainability*, *Environmental Sociology*, *Journal of Cleaner Production*). Four are published in economics journals with a heterodox orientation (*Ecological Economics* and *Feminist Economics*), and two in general social science journals. Twelve articles were published in social policy journals and one in a social work journal. Of the twelve articles published in social policy journals, nine are published in themed sections, and one is an invited article to a special issue. *Social Policy & Society* ran a themed section in 2022 with the overarching title “Towards a sustainable welfare state”, which featured four of our articles (Coote, 2022; Dukelow, 2022; Gough, 2022; Laruffa et al., 2022). The following year, *European Journal of Social Security* published a special issue titled “Tackling inequality and providing sustainable welfare through eco-social policies”. Three of the articles included here (Hirvilammi et al., 2023; Lee and Koch, 2023; Zimmermann and Gengnagel, 2023) were published in this issue. In addition, the article by Snell et al. (2023) appeared in a themed section titled “Social Policy and the Climate Crisis” a year later. Dukelow and Murphy’s article (2022) was included in an issue dedicated to the celebration of the *Journal of Social Policy*’s 50-year anniversary. To mark the occasion, the editorial board invited abstracts to discuss “the future of social policy debates”, and Dukelow and Murphy’s article on “post-growth, post-productivist ecosocial policy” was among the selected contributions. Thus, among the publications selected for review, the only article published in a social policy journal outside a themed issue/section is the article by McGann and Murphy (2023) on participation income. A list of all included studies with full bibliographical details along with a classification of the type of publication and main academic discipline is available in appendix [Table A 1](#).

This publishing profile can be considered good as well as bad news. On a positive note, two internationally established social policy journals have devoted special issues or sections to eco-social issues. This can be seen as a further indication of ongoing mainstreaming and consolidation of socio-ecological questions on the international social policy and welfare state research agenda. That a major social policy outlet like the *Journal of Social Policy* includes an article on eco-social policies when identifying and describing the future of social policy debates points in the same direction. Thus, a quarter of a century into the 21st century it is good to observe that socio-ecological considerations are no longer a niche topic in social policy scholarship. However, applying a more critical outlook, the dearth of articles explicitly addressing social services through an eco-social lens suggests that this is still an underdeveloped perspective in the social policy literature.

Table 2 Overview of contributions included in the review

Article	Geographical scope	Methods	Broad theme	Policy instruments	Main argument
Bartelet and de Gooyert (2025)	Frontrunner governments: Bhutan, Scotland, New Zealand, Wales	Document study: Governmental documents and budgets	Government-led initiatives: Implications of wellbeing economy principles for infrastructure planning and investment	Decarbonisation and digitalization, inequality reduction, social services, circular economy, long-term planning, green urban infrastructure, housing	“Well-being economy” offers a road map and can be used to legitimize quite different policies. Infrastructure plays a vital role across cases.
Bohnenberger (2020)	General	Systematic discussion based on literature	Developing a framework for sustainable welfare benefits	Universal basic income (UBI), universal basic services (UBS), universal basic vouchers (UBV) and the calibration of the three	Successful policies will include all three instruments, with variations depending on fields and circumstance
Büchs (2021)	General	Systematic discussion based on literature	Comparing strengths and weaknesses of UBI and UBS for sustainable welfare	UBI and UBS	The two approaches should be seen as complimentary rather than conflicting; attention must be paid to institutional contexts in which they operate.
Büchs (2025)	General	Systematic discussion based on literature	Presenting key policy proposals made to promote sustainable welfare.	Prioritizing ecological and social objectives over economical; decoupling work and welfare (UBI and UBS); working time reduction, reduction in inequality.	These four approaches can contribute to making welfare states more independent from growth while also supporting needs satisfaction for all within ecological limits.
Büchs and Koch (2017) (BOOK)	General	Systematic discussion based on literature	Human well-being under post-growth conditions	Potential routes: macroeconomic steering, redistribution, carbon rationing, consumption, working time reduction (ch. 7)	Growth is ending and humanity must adapt. Welfare states must find a way to sustain themselves without continuous growth.



Bridgen (2026)	General	Systematic discussion based on literature	Public support for post-growth policies; can a thicker conceptualization of need provide a foundation for a more publicly acceptable postgrowth social policy?	Working time reduction (WTR), to illustrate key points.	To overcome resistance to green policies, attention should be moved from material needs of disadvantaged groups toward the non-material needs of a broader population, highlighting unmet, non-material needs affecting a broad range of the population.
Bridgen and Saikkonen (2025)	Finland and the UK	Two case studies of policy approaches	Social sustainability in ageing welfare states	Holistic approach; integrated sustainability. Emphasis on prevention and everyday human resources	Need to pay attention to trade-offs and synergies between economic, environmental and social sustainability dimensions
Carrosio and De Vidovich (2023)	General; discussion focusses on EU countries	Systematic discussion based on literature, some references to policy	Energy poverty as a topic for eco-welfare	“Pre-distributive policy”: intervention in housing stocks, solutions to decrease energy demand of vulnerable households.	Policies need to move from distributive elements such as energy subsidies and transfers to vulnerable households, toward pre-distributive policies to strengthen capability to reduce demand.
Coote (2022)	General	Systematic discussion based on literature	Universal Basic Services	UBS	Presenting the idea of UBS, explaining its merits. Examples from childcare, housing, and food
Dengler and Lang (2022)	General	Systematic discussion based on literature	Incremental, emancipatory decommodification of care work	Collective (re)organization in the sphere of the commons	Integrates degrowth and feminist scholarship, arguing for a commonization of care
Ding and Hirvilammi (2024)	General	Systematic discussion based on literature	Just transitions in the labour market	Green jobs; green skills; green compensation	Labour market issues are poorly represented in the literature on sustainability. Article aims to synthesise literature on labour security and just transition literature

Dukelow (2022)	General, some examples from EU and EU countries	Systematic discussion based on literature, some references to policy	The meaning of activation over time	Activation	Activation policies are typically seen as anathema to postgrowth societies, yet activation is a flexible concept and can also be used in processes to transform work and implement job guarantees within postgrowth thinking.
Dukelow and Murphy (2022)	General	Systematic discussion based on literature	Bringing degrowth literature into social policy by reimagining the decommodification concept	Diversity of policy approaches to redistribution; social consumption; social investment	Three core areas: the redistribution of time across work and care; repurposing of active labour market measures; and reorienting cash transfers and services
Emilson et al. (2025) (BOOK)	Swedish cities (Stockholm, Gothenburg, Malmö)	Interviews and surveys to civil servants; civil society protesters, population	Implementing sustainable transitions at the local (city) level	New approaches to public policy; going beyond silos; overcoming inertia. Concerned with mapping status quo more than prescriptive policies.	Researchers identify three distinct mechanisms shaping the integration of social equity with strict environmental limits transition: institutional inertia, emergent local policies, and the potential for systemic transformation
Fitzpatrick (2014) (BOOK)	General, particular reference to UK	Systematic discussion based on literature	Eco-social understandings of causes, symptoms and solutions to poverty	Ecosocial approaches to energy and fuel; food; housing; transport, flooding, waste; air and water	Developing an ecosocial understanding of poverty in developed nations; theoretical model of causes, symptoms and possible solutions
Fromberg and Lund (2024)	High-income countries	Systematic literature review	Policy proposals for ecosocial policy	5 themes identified in literature: Democracy & participation, Income & employment, Redistributive taxation, Consumption regulation, Social services	Rich literature identified, 126 policy proposals in 73 texts. Research gaps: policy strategy, detailing individual policy proposals, and policy mixes.
Gough (2017b)	General	Systematic discussion based on literature	Consumption in the affluent world and	Taxing high-carbon luxuries; social tariffs;	Highlighting consumer demand in climate policy. Proposals to



			resulting consumption-based emissions	widening social consumption; rationing/personal carbon allowances	recompose consumption from high- to low carbon goods, without necessarily cutting volume; maintaining fairness.
Gough (2022)	General	Systematic discussion based on literature	Scenarios for sustainable welfare	Scenario 1: Green New Deal + social guarantee; S2: Economy of Egalitarian Sufficiency	Imagining two scenarios for sustainable welfare
Hirvilammi et al. (2023)	Finland	Analysis of four eco-social initiatives	Eco-social initiatives that aim to reduce environmental impact while enhancing social inclusion	Building transformative capacity through social networks, knowledge, shared visions and financial resources; strong institutions and trust enhance implementation	Identifying and examining actual policy initiatives implemented to reduce carbon footprints
Im et al. (2025)	Denmark, Germany, Spain, Poland	Document analysis, emphasising Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF plans)	Social policy responses to decarbonisation efforts	Compensation, social investment, industrial policy, differentiated efforts	Responses to social challenges created by decarbonisation efforts vary by country, informed by demographics, labour market structure and social policy traditions.
Laksevics et al. (2025)	Experts from Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Spain, Sweden	Delphi approach; experts and stakeholders	Desirability and feasibility of six eco-social measures to enable 1.5° C lifestyles	Measures discussed: income ceilings; free public transport; renovation of energy-inefficient buildings; UBS; job guarantee; working time reduction	Most preferred: low-efficiency housing retrofits, least preferred: income ceilings. Concerns for motivation raised regarding worktime reduction, job guarantees, and income ceilings, concerns for efficiency and innovation regarding UBS and free transport. Preference for broad, supranational approach over isolated, national measures.
Laruffa et al. (2022)	General	Systematic discussion based on literature	Revising the notion of PI, repositioning it as green conditional basic income	Participation Income combined with social services (e.g., employment support and activation	Combining CA with ethics of care approach; shifting emphasis from economic production to social

			anchored in the capability approach	services) public infrastructures	reproduction and environmental reparation. Address PI concerns.
Lee and Koch (2023)	Sweden	Deliberative citizens forums	Organising work and social protection to promote sustainable welfare	UBI; PI; UBS; working time reductions	Support in forums for radical socio-economic reform, not mere “green growth”. Need to broaden the scope of debate around work; toward an imperative of work requiring work to meet social and ecological needs.
Lee et al. (2023)	Sweden	Deliberative citizens forums, survey	Democratic support for sustainable welfare	Regulating maximum level of needs satisfaction, guaranteeing minimum level of needs satisfaction	Considerable gap between the far-reaching policy measures that most forum participants consider necessary and the measures citizens of Sweden are presently prepared to support.
Lucena de Andrés (2026)	General	Systematic discussion based on literature	Combining UBI and UBS into a “package solution” for eco-social welfare	UBI; UBS	UBI and UBS should be combined within a PEPP that also includes work time reduction, maximum income, the commons); understanding UBI and UBS as a continuum
Matthies et al. (2019)	Finland, Italy, Germany, Belgium, the UK	Qualitative analysis of 50 ecosocial innovations (ESI)	The role of grassroots innovations combining social, ecological and economic aspects of sustainable transition	Grassroot innovations	ESIs can be forerunners for sustainable transition; integrative practices include diversity of activities, successful networking, addressing new livelihood, focus on food, explicit conceptual work on sustainability.
McGann and Murphy (2023)	General	Systematic discussion based on literature	Which form of income support can best complement UBS?	UBS; participation income (PI)	Shortcomings of contemporary welfare capitalism in meeting needs, social policy lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic
Neier et al. (2024)	Austria, general relevance	Review of 151 measures identified in	Eco-social labour market policies	Labour market policies	Few examples of PES policies with explicit eco-social orientation.



		Austria, Europe, research literature			Proposes 15 policies in six thematic areas to promote eco-social objectives.
Pagani et al. (2026)	England (London)	Causal Loop Diagrams (CLD), workshop with Housing Associations, System Dynamics	The compatibility of degrowth agenda with that of social housing providers	Social housing	Degrowth isn't just a radical academic idea but something housing practitioners are already groping toward; participatory systems mapping can help bridge the gap between practitioner intuition and structural transformation.
Snell et al. (2023)	General, UK	Participatory online workshops, participants mainly from UK; literature review	Pathways to embed climate change in social policy scholarship and practice	Housing, energy, water Health and social care Migration, crime, justice Family, childhood, education	Mapping how climate change challenges extant social policy paradigms, suggesting pathways forward
Stamm (2023)	Finland	Expert interviews	Perception and interpretation of sustainability in services for unemployed people	Services for unemployed people; social work	Valuable ideas and successful local implementation in services for the unemployed already exist; potential to follow up.
Thunqvist et al. (2023)	General	Integrative literature review	The role of VET in the green transition of industry	Vocational Education and Training (VET)	Themes in the literature: conceptualisation of green jobs and skills in VET; high-tech innovations and inclusive growth for VET greening; towards sustainable work-based learning for green skills in VET; radical green transformative approach in VET; the co-creation of skill-formation ecosystems.
Vogel et al. (2024)	UK	UK statistics on (in)adequacy of livelihoods, during and after the global financial crisis	Vulnerability of livelihood in situation with less/no economic growth	Possible interventions: UBS; UBI; minimum income; job guarantee; living wage; worktime reductions; pension guarantee ++	Economic growth is coming to an end; need to secure livelihoods under new circumstances

Winston (2022)	General	Systematic discussion based on literature	Developing workable definitions of concepts sustainable development (SD) and sustainable communities (SC); applying to housing	Regeneration programs targeting housing	Regeneration programs could address simultaneously many social and environmental problems contributing to progress on many dimensions of SD and the UNSDGs.
Winston et al. (2025)	Denmark and Ireland	EU-SILC and national databases	Just transition toward less use of fossil fuels at household level	Eco, social and eco-social measures to avoid/alleviate energy poverty (EP)	Both countries would benefit from “reactive eco-social investment policies”, e.g area-based retrofitting of homes of low-income households
Zimmerman and Gengnagel (2023)	European Union (European Green Deal, EGD)	Document analysis: EGD documents and stakeholders’ responses	Social implications of the proposed EGD measures	Social dimensions affected by EGD: energy poverty, health, job creation, housing	EGD does not disregard redistributive conflict but also does not address them explicitly. Stakeholders, too, address mainly economic dimension.

4. Discussion: Social services as socio-ecological policy tools

4.1. The eco-social policy agenda and social services

Our literature review has sought to map current knowledge of social services as potential or already existing tools in the green transition. In this section we turn to a discussion of the specific research questions set out in the introduction based on the screened contributions as well as evidence from the wider eco-social policy and sustainable wellbeing literature.

A first observation is that there appears to be no consensus among “eco-social” scholars on how social services should be understood and defined, nor about which services and goods should be included. We note, for instance, that the notions of ‘social services’ or ‘welfare services’ appear in fourteen of the thirty-six reviewed full texts. In other words, most of the literature covered does not refer explicitly to social or welfare services. Instead, we find terms like “basic services”, “essential services”, “core services”, “eco-social services” and “collective” or “public services”. The most widely used term is basic services, typically connected to the notion of universal basic services (UBS). More specifically, around half of the thirty-six pieces included engages with basic services. In addition, we find policies that are not explicitly labelled as services by the authors. Nonetheless, we suggest that some of these policies have service-like features and that we, for this reason, consider relevant to include them in the literature review. One notable example is references to different kinds of public or social ‘infrastructure’ that occur in a number of articles.

The literature varies in the degree to which the contributions specify in concrete terms the services they consider relevant and how these should be organised, for instance in terms of provision and funding. Many contributions operate at a general level, pointing to the importance of basic services without being concrete about which services would belong in this category. If anything, authors mention services with reference to relatively broad policy fields like education, healthcare, transport or child and elderly care without detailing potential or actual policy instruments or concrete empirical examples. Instead, as we elaborate on below, there is considerable attention to overarching and rather general objectives and policy design principles.

A previous literature review, that is also included here (Fromberg and Lund (2024)), presented a very useful systematic mapping and synthesis of what they refer to as ‘eco-social’ policy proposals. Their definition of eco-social builds on the definition offered by Mandelli (2022) (see above). Based on the review, they categorise policy proposals into five overarching themes. One of the identified themes is labelled ‘social services’, which for Fromberg and Lund appears to be shorthand for ‘Universal Basic Services’. This strengthens the impression that understandings of social services in the eco-social literature are relatively undeveloped, and that no consensus exists on which these services are, what they ought to do, and how – if at all – they differ from public goods. Limiting the discussion of services to target group (universal) and scope (basic), however, contributes little to the scholarly – and indeed to the political – debate on how we should think about service design in a society designed for lower environmental impact.

While the literature reviewed by Fromberg and Lund (2024) can be criticised for lacking variation and nuance on the topic of social services, it nevertheless underscores how important the notion of Universal Basic Services (UBS) is in these debates. It is a widely used term that has received a lot of scholarly attention. Coote, one of the protagonists in developing the UBS agenda, describes UBS as an ‘approach’ or ‘principled framework for policy and practice’ (Coote, 2022: 474). Proponents of this approach has applied it to a wide range of services, among them education, health care, social care, housing, food, transport, energy and

electricity, access to digital communication, banking services, police and emergency services, and public infrastructure (parks, forests, information).

The debate on UBS thus goes well beyond the services normally discussed as 'social services'. Indeed, when we look at the long list of items identified in the literature as resources that should be provided within an UBS framework, it emerges that the distinction between collective goods and services is very blurred in practice. In fact, Bohnenberger (2020: 21) describes public infrastructures as 'classical public *goods* like parks, forests, information, and streets' (our *italics*). While these infrastructures are relevant from a collective and societal point of view, they are not typically regarded as 'social services'. With a partial exception for information, they are tangible public goods rather than services and are only indirectly related to the essential resources to which individuals need access for a decent standard of living.

Other services, which clearly belong as social services but perhaps do not fit perfectly within the UBS framework of providing direct access to basic needs, are services for the unemployed (Stamm, 2023; see also Dukelow, 2022; Neier et al., 2024). By extending the question of sustainability in relation to labour market policies to include not only cost efficiency (or economic sustainability) but to embrace also the ecological dimension, public employment services may be turned into a pivotal actor in the green transition, helping workers move away from ecologically damaging sectors (Neier et al., 2024; Stamm, 2023).

To sum up: the literature included in this review does not present a unified concept of what 'social services' are, indeed, fewer than half of them even use the terms 'social services' or 'welfare services'. The majority talk about services, but do not limit themselves to (some notion of) *social* or *welfare* services. As noted, Fromberg and Lund's (2024) important and very strong recent literature review conflates the debate on services with the discussion of UBS, and the UBS literature appears to intentionally make the concept of 'services' as wide-ranging as possible, including most, if not all, services of importance for human flourishing and collective or societal wellbeing.

In many ways, opening up the issue as much as possible can be seen as a positive approach: The eco-social policy agenda, by its very nature, forces us to think 'out of the box' and look beyond the traditional welfare state toolkit of cash benefits, welfare services and social regulation. This is a useful approach in a situation where the policy landscape evolves, and scholarship must constantly try to keep up by updating its analytical lenses to chart the terrain as it changes. Still, this openness makes it harder to decide where to draw the boundaries of the field of study, and as such poses some analytical challenges.

Since the literature reviewed does not offer clear demarcations, it is worth looking towards the actual European policy landscape. The European Pillar of Social Rights represents the 'social leg' of the EU and may provide some practical guidance and serve as a compass for how 'social services' should be understood. We suggest that the EPSR points us in the direction of the main categories of services that can reasonably be conceptualised as 'social' services in the transition to an economy that pursues the goal of sustainable wellbeing. This avoids broadening the field so much that it obfuscates our social policy lens. Its chapter I on 'equal opportunities and access to the labour market' and chapter III on 'social protection and inclusion' are particularly relevant. In chapter I, principle 1 refers to the right to 'quality education, training and lifelong learning' and principle 4 sets out a right to personalised 'active support' to improve prospects in the labour market. Turning to chapter III, principles 11, 16 and 18 highlight the right to early childhood education and care, health care and long-term care, respectively, all of which should be 'affordable' and of 'good quality'. Principle 19 addresses housing. Included here are good quality 'social housing or housing' assistance 'for those in need' and 'adequate shelter and services' for the homeless. Finally, principle 20 refers to 'essential services', the access to which should be supported 'for those in need'. Water, sanitation, energy, transport, financial services and digital communication are the services explicitly mentioned. In addition, principle 14 on 'minimum income' is also of direct relevance as a potential enabler of several of the services listed in under principle 20 since several of them, such as banking services, internet and telecommunication, gas and electricity, are typically purchased directly from market providers. For an ecologically conscious approach to social policy, the question is how these services can be designed in a way that promotes human wellbeing in a way that facilitates rather than slows down the green transition.



4.2. Principles and priorities in policy design and delivery

A core argument for UBS is that the task of guaranteeing access to 'life's essentials' is a collective responsibility. The notion of "life's essentials" in the UBS-debate is related to similar notions in debates on poverty and societal minimum standards in rich countries, and thus includes, but is more than just, food, clothes and shelter. It is about having what you need in order to have the opportunities and choices necessary to participate in society.' (Bradshaw et al., 2008:1). Ensuring such standards for all can be done through different modes of service provision. Key principles includes the identification of basic needs and the means through which to satisfy these – sometimes referred to as 'needs satisfiers' (Gough, 2017b) – and free delivery (Büchs, 2021). With regard to the last point of free delivery, some authors adds the qualification that they should be free for 'all who need them' (Lucena de Andrés, 2026: 206; similarly Büchs, 2025), suggesting that it may be justified to limit somewhat the degree of universality by setting need as a criterion for eligibility.

Both from an ecological and economic perspective there may be good arguments to restrict access to avoid costly and unnecessary, environmentally harmful excess consumption. In fact, drawing on need theory, Gough (2022) makes a distinction between *necessities*, *conventional goods* and *luxuries*. In this reading, the principle of sufficiency along with environmental impact should underpin evaluative criteria for (re)distribution and fairness in the allocation of goods and services. Necessities are 'goods and services that are necessary for a basic level of wellbeing' (Gough, 2017b: 3). In contrast, luxuries are those that are not strictly necessary for a decent standard of living (Gough, 2017b). In the middle – between the minimum standards that entail access to necessities for all, and luxuries above maximum standards that exceed a sustainable use of natural and social resources – he envisages a consumption corridor. Akin to the safe space in Raworth's doughnut, the consumption corridor ensures wellbeing and a good life for all today and in the future (Gough, 2022).

Another important issue that is frequently mentioned in passing as a problem is that of increasing inequalities. Büchs (2025) stands out for the way she argues in more detail for why it should be a core priority to reduce inequalities as part of an eco-social policy agenda. She points to three reasons in particular. First, in the absence of intervention, slow or no economic growth may accelerate the trend of increasing income and wealth inequalities. Second, addressing inequality serves as prevention, reducing social issues associated with highly unequal societies, e.g. crime rates, mental health problems, low levels of trust (see also Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). In this way, Büchs argues, governments can reduce 'the demand for welfare expenditure in the long term, making welfare states more growth independent' (Büchs, 2025: 171). Finally, the third argument is that it is easier to satisfy basic needs for all when inequality is at a modest level. In a context of resource scarcity, it will be more demanding to guarantee access to necessary goods and services for the majority of the population if a small share of the population consumes a high proportion of the available energy, materials and economic resources.

In terms of delivery and organisation, there seems to be agreement around a collective responsibility to ensure access to basic services for those in need, but beyond this, the issue is not well developed in the literature. For some services it makes sense that the state assumes responsibility for provision while other may be provided by non-state organisations supported by the state (Coote, 2022; Gough, 2022). As far as attention to non-state actors is concerned, in a review of the role of vocational education and training in the green transition of industry, Thunqvist et al. (2023) point to the potential for collaboration among different stakeholders such as education and training providers and social partners to co-create green skill-formation ecosystems. Laruffa et al. (2022: 513) present similar ideas in the context of activation of benefit claimants, suggesting that value should be co-created 'within networks of delivery organisations, service users, their families, and communities,' i.e., there should be interaction not only between service users and frontline workers contributions but also with 'the wider social systems in which they are embedded'. Nonetheless, despite these examples, we would argue that the eco-social policy literature has generally been far more concerned with making the normative and practical case for why UBS are legitimate, just and (on their terms) efficient, than with specifying in concrete terms which collective actors should be responsible for funding and delivering such services.

Moreover, and somewhat surprisingly given the context, the literature rarely makes explicit arguments outlining how and why UBS has significant ecological benefits. Such benefits are assumed rather than presented and analysed. For instance, Bohnenberger (2020) asserts when discussing 'state services' that "these public welfare services are *suspected* to have lower material and carbon intensity per Euro spent' compared with

private (household) consumption” (Bohnenberger, 2020:20, italics added). The claim rests on an innovative study by Ottelin et al. (2018) that takes into account the use of public welfare services when modelling per capita consumption-based carbon and material footprints in Finland, based on the Finnish household budget survey. Interesting as this study is, the claim that universally available publicly/collectively produced services are universally available also have lower carbon footprints need stronger empirical underpinnings. UBS, in the studies included in this review, are seen as relevant mainly as an instrument of decoupling economic growth and sustained individual wellbeing. The more technical questions of whether states can produce, say, housing or transport, with lower carbon footprint than a for-profit private actor is more rarely discussed in this literature.

There is a limited discussion of trade-offs and tensions between a range of desirable goals and objectives, but these concerns are emerging in the literature review. Consider for instance the recent contribution by Bridgen’s (2026), that explicitly discusses potential trade-offs between working time reduction (WTR) and other well-being goals. WTR is often favoured by eco-social scholars in the world of work, as a path to decreasing material consumption while increasing leisure and hence (presumably) wellbeing, often imagined in conjunction with an income guarantee and/or universally available services. Studies indicate that WTR is popular among European populations for as long as wages are guaranteed (that is, an offer of shorter hours for the same pay). Low-income earners, in particular, are sceptical when the hypothetical offer of shorter hours is complimented by the threat of lower wages. This may be, as Bridgen (2026:12) points out, that low-income earners are concerned about their ability to meet material needs if their wages are lowered. Bridgen (2026: 12) points out that while WTR could substantially reduce environmental degradation by lowering economic output, wage protection could cause rebound effects due to increased leisure-related emissions. WTR is often proposed in tandem with UBI and UBS, but both are expensive, and given WTR, costs would have to be met from a lower tax base. Costs could be made more manageable by targeting income protection and free services at those with the greatest need, but this would give rise to a number of challenges well-known from social policy research (stigma, non-take-up, and others). In short, even solutions that appear to have clear environmental benefits may have side effects that influence the environment negatively, and leads to unwanted social outcomes. In this regard, also Laruffa et al. (2022) deserve mentioning for their careful discussion of ‘conditionality, stigma and the administrative feasibility’ of participation income, pointing to some of the same issues as Bridgen.



5. Studies of eco-social initiatives using innovative methods and new empirical data

Many of the screened studies use innovative methods and approaches that are unusual in social policy research. This includes the Delphi approach (Lakševics et al., 2025), deliberative citizens forums (Lee and Koch, 2023) online workshops (Snell et al., 2023) and Causal Loop Diagrams (Pagani et al., 2026). These approaches supplement the more commonly used approaches, such as analyses of policy documents (Im et al., 2025), and interviews with stakeholders (Hirvilammi et al., 2023) and practitioners (Stamm, 2023).

As for the topics covered in the empirical studies, one group of studies examine what politicians at national levels are doing, or intend to do, in a given situation. For instance, Im et al. (2025) study how politicians at the elite level in four EU countries intend to counter any negative social outcomes of the decarbonisation of industry, as expressed in their Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) plans, while Zimmermann and Gengnagel (2023) examine how social concerns are expressed in the key documents of the European Green Deal. Bartelet and de Gooyert (2025) focus explicitly on the plurality of approaches that can be grouped under the umbrella “well-being economy” and conduct a systematic web search using relevant criteria to identify frontrunner governments.

A subset of studies addresses more specifically the situation in individual countries, or policy configurations at national levels, to discuss existing challenges and practices as well as potential ways forward (Bridgen and Saikkonen, 2025; Neier et al., 2024; Vogel et al., 2024). Bridgen and Saikkonen (2025) discuss how concerns for social sustainability can be squared with another important concern of mature welfare states, namely population ageing, presenting empirical examples gathered from existing policies in Finland and the UK. Neier et al. (2024) scan public employment services, mainly in Austria, in search of initiatives with explicit eco-social orientations. Few examples are found, and the authors go on to outline how such initiatives could be promoted. Vogel et al. (2024) discuss how livelihoods can be secured in a post-growth era and use official statistics from the UK to suggest the scale of vulnerability in the country. In a similar vein, Winston et al. (2025) combine the EU-SILC survey with national data sources to estimate the scale of the energy poverty problem in Denmark and Ireland, as a starting point for a discussion of environmental, social and eco-social measures to avoid such poverty.

The most in-depth study of policy practices and institutional hurdles is undertaken by Emilsson et al. (2025), which examines the perspectives of local government officials, civil society actors and the public in three major Swedish cities (Stockholm, Malmö, Gothenburg). The study uses theories of institutional change to discuss how the climate crisis can be understood as an external shock of the sort that potentially can disturb the status quo and lead to transformative change. The study however observes considerable inertia. Central political and legal regulation fosters (continued) silo thinking, which makes pathbreaking change difficult. The silo organization affects both local councils, where employees and politicians see it as their role to protect their domain, and civil society organisations, which are incentivized to act within the silos. Population surveys indicate reluctance to change and little interest in policies to counter climate change.

Several of the empirical studies focused on potential eco-social policy options, analyse public support and the conditions for such support. Lee et al (2023) and Lee and Koch (2023) use deliberative citizens forums to gauge the opinions of members of the public as well as to chart how the discussion develops as different cues are introduced. In the former study, such data are triangulated with survey data, to further examine popular opinion. Snell et al. (2023) examine output from online workshops, and Lakševics et al. (2025) analyse expert discourse using the Delphi method. In addition to these studies gauging public opinion, Pagani et al. (2025) and Stamm (2023) use qualitative designs to examine input from practitioners working in relevant services (housing and services for the unemployed, respectively).

Only two studies captured in this literature search have systematically identified and analysed concrete eco-social initiatives and practices rather than overarching strategies like the European Green Deal and Recovery and Resilience Facility at EU and national levels.

Hirvilammi et al. (2023) analyse four eco-social initiatives in Finland that have previously been hailed as successful. Against this background, the study used qualitative interviews to illuminate which factors have been vital in achieving success. The four initiatives are the national strategy to promote Sustainable Public Procurement (SPP), a network of municipalities aiming to reach carbon neutrality (HINKU), local experiments to help households to try out low-carbon lifestyles (SUSLA), and Carbon Footprint Calculators (CFC) to steer individuals towards reducing their carbon footprint through their consumption choices.

Since the analysis is geared towards identifying success factors rather than evaluating the initiatives, the article is relatively scant on descriptions of practices, but it is worth noting that neither of them explicitly targets the design of social services.

The initiative most likely to influence social services is probably the HINKU network of municipalities. The network awards annual prizes to outstanding initiatives and have rewarded actions relating to building/infrastructure and public transport¹ – all key municipal responsibilities. Even if these do not directly affect what is commonly thought of as social services, the study identifies a series of interrelated success factors that we think are of relevance when thinking about how to facilitate the transition towards sustainable wellbeing. The highlighted factors were:

- social networks, collaboration and participation;
- knowledge learning and monitoring;
- shared policy frameworks and visions;
- financial resources.

Arguably, the success criteria identified by Hirvilammi et al. (2023) mirror the “inertia factors” pointed out by Emilsson et al (2025), who also studied policies at the local level. Where Emilsson et al (2025) found that silo organization was a major hurdle, Hirvilammi et al (2023) identified networks and collaboration, as well as shared policy frameworks and visions as success factors. Reducing carbon emissions and providing sound welfare services for the population are two policy aims that are rarely connected in public administration, thus initiatives to build bridges seem crucial. Accordingly, policy visions and strategic collaboration that cut across departmental or administrative boundaries appear fundamental.

The other study that has mapped initiatives and practices is written by Matthies et al. (2019). The study maps initiatives in Finland, Germany, Belgium, Italy and the UK. The initiatives included were screened against three criteria: (1) they developed new innovative practical steps towards a more sustainable society and are part of a social or solidarity economy, not (only) aiming to make profit; (2) they enabled the participation and realisation of the new ideas of people in unemployment and worked for and with young people; and (3) their activities included ecological sustainability in one or another way (Matthies et al., 2019: 5). Relevant initiatives were found by posting calls in relevant mailing lists and social media groups, through pointers from academic experts in relevant fields, or through personal contacts. This approach rendered 50 ecosocial innovations, 22 of these were in Finland. The projects were diverse, “...including re- and upcycling projects, gardening and agricultural projects and projects avoiding food waste, social enterprises, cooperatives and community economy models, employment projects and spaces for creative and social community building” (Matthies et al., 2019: 6). The authors categorize them in four types: those starting from a social purpose or interest (for instance to mitigate youth unemployment); those starting from strong environmental awareness (e.g. urban gardening projects); those prioritizing culture, education and community building (such as cultural cafes, meeting points); and hubs, umbrella organization or research networks. The authors conclude that ecosocial innovations can be seen as a form of social investment and a promising route ahead for social work, but that they can also be restricted by extant modes of income security and activation programs.

While not providing a systematic screening of eco-social programmes, Laruffa et al. (2022) provides three interesting examples related to an ‘enabling’ and needs based approach to activation in the context of social security and employment service receipt. The highlighted examples are presented as steps in the ‘right’

¹ HINKU award, <https://hiilineutraalisuomi.syke.fi/en/hinku/hinku-award/> Accessed 25. June 2026



direction away from paternalism and hard sanctions towards co-production and a stronger say for unemployed individuals in defining their own needs. Potentially, this kind of more participatory and enabling approaches also open the door to a wider interpretation of participation and work beyond formal employment. Most importantly for the authors, it could give room for social care and civic engagement as valued forms of participation. They advocate a welfare state that puts the 'practice of taking care of the world' at the centre (Laruffa et al., 2022: 510), implying the recognition of care for people and the environment as fruitful forms of activation.

This section, it appears that concrete examples of explicitly eco-social policies are scarce in Europe. Only Hirvilammi et al. (2023) and Matthies et al. (2019) map and describe such policies, and these studies are not explicitly focused on social/welfare services. A few instances nonetheless show that the direct eco-social benefits distinguished in section 1.2 are attainable through existing service institutions. Where public libraries lend tools, equipment and instruments, as in Finland, and where municipalities support "library of things" schemes, repair cafes and tool exchanges, a universal and non-stigmatizing service delivers a direct reduction in household material consumption at low marginal cost. Time banking, in which participants exchange services against hour-denominated credits and which the United Kingdom exempts from taxation and benefit assessment, institutionalises the recognition of care and civic participation beyond paid work advocated by Laruffa et al. (2022) and Dukelow and Murphy (2022). Also French legislation requiring supermarkets to donate unsold edible food to charities and food banks links waste reduction to food provision for low-income households.

In this respect, a promising way forward could be to review the core welfare services and discuss how they can contribute to ecological sustainability. This is the approach taken by Coote (2022) when reviewing childcare, housing and food. National regulations for childcare can promote environmental standards and energy efficiency requirements when childcare centres are constructed, equipped and maintained. Furthermore, they can teach children from an early age to value and safeguard the natural environment. Housing can be provided in ways that utilise renewable energy sources, promote low emissions, and give residents access to public transport and bike lanes. Food production should be sustainable, and access to harmful food stuff should be limited. Policies should support local initiatives that promote collective food production and consumption. Systematic discussion of how existing, and crucial, services can be made more environment- friendly complements "bottom-up" studies of ongoing initiatives that may be more peripheral to the larger welfare state context.

Since our review covers only peer-reviewed publications, we also checked whether concrete examples surface in the project literature of adjacent Horizon Europe programmes and, interestingly, they do not. Indeed, they reproduce the pattern we find in the academic literature. The MERGE consortium's shortlist of eighteen policy instruments for sustainable and inclusive wellbeing (MERGE, 2025, see www.mergeproject.eu) devotes one of its five policy areas to "access to social protection and services", and that area contains exactly three instruments: universal basic services, basic income and care income, two of which are cash transfers. However, it is relevant to note that these benefits are sometimes proposed in combination with basic services.

Even the Sustainable Prosperity policy database (www.sustainable-prosperity.eu), curated by ZOE Institute, is dominated by fiscal and regulatory instruments. Among the entries describing services, almost none concerns childcare, long-term care, social work or employment services. In the case of MERGE, "real life cases" for universal basic services are municipal housing in Vienna, free national public transport in Luxembourg, universal healthcare in the United Kingdom, France and Sweden, free or low-fee universities in Iceland, Slovenia and Finland, and Finnish public libraries lending tools, sports equipment and musical instruments. Two cases, Dutch housing associations and universal childcare in Norway, are recognizable welfare services but none were designed as eco-social services, showing the difficulty of finding actual examples and how in the end the exercise returns conventional welfare provision read through a new normative lens. To turn these social services into actual 'eco-social' services would, as a minimum, require explicit efforts to minimise their ecological footprints. A more ambitious but clearly more demanding exercise would be to design the social services in ways that convincingly promise direct or indirect ecological benefits - for instance by measurable reductions in the carbon footprint of social housing or by helping citizens cope with consequences of the green transition reducing popular resistance.

6. Limitations

This scoping review has some important limitations. First, we rely solely on articles and book chapters that have been published in peer-reviewed outlets, excluding unpublished works and findings published in “grey” channels. This may have led to omissions of important findings, particularly those of a very recent date. Second, we have included only works published in English, which will have led to omission of works published in other major European languages. The explicit focus on Europe, moreover, led to non-inclusion of several potentially interesting studies from the rest of the world. In the selection process, we noted in particular high numbers of potentially interesting studies from China. This was a deliberate choice, given that we address the European policy context, but it implies that we may have missed, in particular, interesting examples of service design tried and tested in other geographical and political contexts. Third, we only included contributions that were easily available online. This explains the omission of an important contribution like Coote and Percy’s book on UBS (Coote and Percy, 2020), among others. We assume such omissions have not been critical to the review, since scholars who are central to this debate and write books also present their ideas in shorter form in articles.

Fourth, like all scoping reviews based on structured literature searches, we identified only studies using the key terms used in the search string. There is a balance between making the search term too narrow (and thus missing many relevant studies) and too broad (hence identifying a too-large pool of studies to be screened, making high-quality screening within a given time frame unrealistic and increasing the risks of screener bias). We did, for instance, not include the search term “social work”. Social policy and social work are adjacent disciplines that have much in common, yet our literature review has been clearly biased towards social policy and welfare state research. This was a deliberate choice since our study primarily aimed to contribute to ongoing debates in eco-social policy, which has its roots in comparative welfare state research, but it may have led us to miss certain studies that use the “social work”-lingo. Similarly, casting the net the way we did, we did not catch an important contribution like Gough (2019), who used keywords like “provisioning systems” and “foundational economy” in lieu of our search terms. While this is true for all scoping reviews – output of literature searches are extremely sensitive to variation in wording and the inclusion/omission of key terms – it may be even more critical here than in most scoping reviews, because the topic addressed is still emerging and there is yet no established consensus on the terms to use. Future scoping reviews can build on this work by experimenting with different search terms while aiming to keep the terms used as closely as possible to the scholarly language that will undoubtedly emerge as this literature matures.

Finally, again in keeping with established practices for scoping reviews, we have prioritized breadth over depth. We have focused on mapping the general volume and characteristics rather than deep data synthesis – an overview rather than detailed discussion of individual works or groups of work. This limits the use of scoping reviews for policy recommendations, or for pointing out potential avenues for theoretical or methodological development.



7. Conclusion

This scoping review addressed three research questions. The first relates to identifying the services that are considered useful in a socio-ecological perspective, that is, services that serve social purposes with no or minimal ecological costs or even bring social and ecological benefits in a synergistic way. We have noticed a gap between the literature identified here, and the literature usually addressed in social policy debate: contributions discussed in the review point to education, health, care and housing, but also to food, transport, energy and energy poverty, digital connectivity, and public infrastructures. It thus operates with a much broader concept of “social services” or “public services” than what is traditionally found in the ‘mainstream’ social policy literature. There appears to be no current consensus of what that core services are – practically all services that are needed to secure a basic and dignified human existence can be discussed as part of the eco-social framework. In this sense, what emerges as an eco-social approach is both more expansive and more restrictive than “classical” social policy literature: it is more expansive in terms of the services discussed, yet more restrictive in its vision of what these services shall do. In the studies covered here, the basic normative understanding is that core services shall address core needs. Other aims highlighted in other strands of social policy literature – for instance that education should promote social mobility, or care services should be designed to alter traditional gender roles – are typically not discussed at any length in studies concerned with service design that minimise ecological costs. However, the reviewed contribution from Dengler and Lang (2022), Dukelow and Murphy (2022) and McGann and Murphy (2023) represent valuable exceptions, all drawing on feminist scholarship and the notion of decommodification along with the valorisation of social and ecological reproduction.

The second research question asked which goals or priorities in policy design and principles of award should underpin future eco-social services. Here, following from the outline above, the answer is relatively unified: the eco-social policy literature favours universalism as the key principle of award. Reciprocity is spoken of favourably, but none of the studies suggests explicit demands for reciprocity in order to benefit from basic services. Other principles of award typically suggested in social policy literature, such as income maintenance or needs-testing, are either not discussed or dismissed. Needs satisfaction and human wellbeing are recurrent normative commitments, while the promotion of paid employment is not discussed as a legitimate aim of social services (but see the thoughtful discussion in Dukelow, 2022). Many contributions refer to Raworth’s (2012) “doughnut economies”, where “a safe and just space for humans” exists between a floor defined by human need and a ceiling defined by planetary boundaries (Raworth, 2012). Just social services should ensure that everybody exist above the floor, while aiming to reduce private spending that exceed planetary boundaries. Beyond these limits, the eco-social literature rarely discusses the distribution of resources – but given that both the floor and the ceiling are extremely controversial in the public debate, this cannot really be seen as a shortcoming of the literature.

The third research question asked how services should be organised and with which motivations. On this, we have found the literature relatively silent. When the “eco-social” literature addresses core social services, it is typically in general terms. Nevertheless, the “eco-social” literature emerges as an increasingly solid pillar of social policy scholarship, with a shared set of concerns, perspectives and normative commitments. It is illustrative, for instance, that when Bohnenberger (2020) discusses the proper calibration of UBI, UBS and UBVs, she does so within a framework that does not fundamentally question the value of universal, basic provision as such – the debate is on the concrete settings rather than the approach. Few of the contributions discussed here address the more tangled issues of who should fund, allocate and deliver services (Brandsen and Honingh, 2016), the proper balance between public, private for-profit and non-profit actors (e.g., Andersen et al., 2026), the role of professions (Adams, 2015), or distribution and prioritisation under conditions of scarcity (Gautun and Grødem, 2015).

In the second part of the review, we have summed up concrete empirical examples from across Europe of eco-social services, that is, services that are explicitly designed to foster wellbeing while keeping within planetary boundaries. As noted, only few of these studies have identified and analysed ongoing initiatives. Most of the literature that uses systematic empirical methods have analysed elite, expert and/or mass discourse, and/or the conditions that need to be fulfilled in order for green initiatives to prosper. This literature is still, arguably, in its infancy, although interesting perspectives are emerging on drivers and barriers for more environment-friendly policies (e.g. Emilsson et al, 2025; Lee et al., 2023) and on differences between countries

with different demographic, industrial and political starting points (e.g. Im et al., 2025; Bartelet & de Gooyert, 2025; Bridgen & Saikkonen, 2025).

Overall, we conclude that the literature on eco-social welfare services is emerging and is a lot stronger than it was only ten years ago. Two findings stand out. On the one hand, the eco-social literature lacks a shared concept of social services and in practice collapses the category into universal basic services. On the other, the ecological benefits attributed to universal public provision are largely assumed rather than measured, resting mainly on a single modelling study from Finland. Both are, in our view, priorities for the next phase of research in this field. It is notable that a clear majority of the studies included here have been published within the last decade. The literature presents vibrant debates on the normative underpinnings of eco-social approaches, the calibration of key instruments (Universal Basic Income, Participation Income, Universal Basic Services, and, occasionally, Universal Basic Vouchers – see Bohnenberger, 2020), and the relationship(s) between human wellbeing and planetary boundaries. Our assessment is that the literature in this field is more developed, and more unified, when it comes to policy design and principles of award than what it is with regard to the scope of services to be analysed and how and by whom services should be provided. Also, there is as of yet a dearth of empirical examples to analyse. It is likely, still, that there will be an interplay between the burgeoning scholarly literature and professionals and activists in the field, so that rapidly increasing academic interest may inspire more eco-social initiatives at the local and national levels. This may in turn lead to more empirical research, and an even stronger position for eco-social perspectives within social policy debates.

7.1 Research gaps

Much of the literature reviewed here is not empirical, but rather theoretical and conceptual contributions. The empirical studies included are highly diverse, both in terms of study objects, methods and approaches. This makes it difficult to point out “research gaps” in the same way as one would do if reviewing an empirical field. In this section, we concentrate instead on limitations in the approaches dominating the eco-social field, with particular emphasis on why this literature is not more strongly integrated in the wider field of social policy studies. We recognise, however, that this may not be what (all) scholars in the field want: the debate on how to make modern societies more environmentally friendly has relevance far beyond the debate on design of benefits and services, and scholars may *want* to address a diverse group of scholars, educators and students. It might however be mutually beneficial if “mainstream” social policy scholars and eco-social scholar communicated more extensively.

The review has shown that eco-social perspectives on social services largely exist side-by-side with the mainstream social policy debate rather than as an integrated part. When contributions are published in the key social policy journals – and most of the contributions reviewed are not – it is typically in special issues edited by dedicated scholars of eco-social policy. One reason for this, we suggest, is that the eco-social welfare state research, and research on eco-social services in particular, still appears somewhat fragmented. There is seemingly little consensus with regard to which services should be studied and where to draw the line between “eco-social services”, “infrastructure” and “public goods”. Stronger consensus on these issues would strengthen the academic impact of the literature and help to position it more strongly within the general social policy literature.

A similar argument can be made for engaging more explicitly with key terms in social policy debates. Using the key terms more actively would make the literature more visible, and increase relevance, for social policy scholars. Key concepts like “decommodification”, “social investment” and “deservingness” are rarely used. There are obvious exceptions: among the studies included here, Dukelow and Murphy (2022) actively discuss the notion of ‘decommodification’, and Im et al. (2025) address responses to social problems created by decarbonisation efforts in the light of countries’ historical commitment to social investment. In a recent publication (not included in the review), Taylor-Gooby (2026) analyses how notions of ‘deservingness’ may influence debates on redistribution in the light of carbon-neutral infrastructures in the global North. These are still exceptions. The paucity of scholarly interaction with such key terms and questions at the core of the discipline, may make it harder for eco-social scholars to exploit and further develop existing analytical frameworks and in this way shape the broader field of comparative welfare state and social policy research.

Another aspect that is notable for its absence in most of the scrutinised literature is that of politics of reform, actor constellations and the direction policy feedback loops. Who might push for policies in the direction that



much the literature favours, which are the main political hurdles and which path dependencies exist? That is, we need more knowledge about the ways in which existing institutional architectures, veto points and policy regimes condition eco-social policy options. While it is not within the remit of this report to synthesise decades of scholarship dominated by authors located in Europe and North America, it suffices to acknowledge that research on the politics of welfare state reform has a long tradition (for instance, Bonoli and Natali, 2012; Hall and Soskice, 2001; Pampel and Williamson, 1989; Pierson, 2001; Streeck and Thelen, 2005 to mention only a few frequently cited examples). Scholarship on eco-social policy has not (yet) reached the same level of maturity but is steadily advancing and catching up.

7.2. Policy implications and recommendations

As a final remark, we observe that while this literature review has primarily engaged with academically oriented literature, there are several insights or lessons for policy worth highlighting. These can be synthesised in three take-home messages:

- **Sustainable wellbeing and equality as guiding principles.** Discussions about social services should focus more on notions like *sustainable wellbeing*, *equality* as overarching goals, enabling citizens to reach (but not exceed) sustainable consumption levels within reasonable consumption corridors. For social services to be eco-social they must support a minimum standard of living for all while paying attention to the potential rebound effects and ecological impacts of services that are available at no or low cost for users.
- **Ecological mainstreaming of social services in Europe.** When developing policies relating to the categories of *services covered in the European Pillar of Social Rights*, the EU and national public administrations should explicitly consider *environmental implications and potential interactions with expected social outcomes*. This is necessary to discover and address potential synergies and tensions between policies to meet the EU's climate and environmental ambitions, on the one hand, and social goals, on the other. Therefore, we encourage investments in data infrastructure to allow better modelling of material and carbon footprints of different policy options to enable informed choices.
- **A broadened understanding and scope of labour market activation.** The third and final message is about *recognising and enabling other forms of activation and participation than paid work*. The literature argues convincingly for the recognition and social valorisation of activities that support care for people, ecological reparation and political participation. Hence, an eco-social perspective teaches us that social services should to a greater extent support and promote participation beyond paid work. Public employment services are the place to begin, and this would involve in practice an explicit mandate for green skill formation and for managed transitions out of high-emission sectors, alongside the recognition of care, ecological reparation and civic engagement as forms of activation in their own right.
- **Low-cost eco-social services already within reach.** Not every step requires new institutions, as we have seen in the case of public libraries in Finland and elsewhere already lending tools, sports equipment and musical instruments alongside books, and municipalities in several countries supporting repair cafés and tool exchanges on the same principle. Schemes of this kind reduce household material consumption through a service that is universal, free at the point of use and free of stigma, at marginal cost to the provider. Their scale is modest, true, but they are among the very few instances found in which a social service delivers a direct ecological benefit rather than an assumed one, and the EU and national governments would do well to treat them as social infrastructure rather than as local initiatives.

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Appendix 1

Table A 1 Publication selected for review

Title	Type of publication	Outlet main discipline
Büchs M and Koch M (2017) <i>Postgrowth and Wellbeing. Challenges to Sustainable Welfare</i> . Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.	Book	Interdisciplinary, general social sciences
Emilsson K, Fritz M, Hildingsson R, et al. (2025) Pathways to Sustainable Welfare: Inertia, Emergence and Transformation in Swedish Cities. In: <i>Pathways to Sustainable Welfare</i> . Policy Press.	Book	Interdisciplinary, general social sciences
Fitzpatrick T (2014) <i>Climate Change and Poverty: A New Agenda for Developed Nations</i> . Bristol University Press.	Book	Interdisciplinary, general social sciences
Bridgen P and Saikkonen P (2025) Integrated sustainability: what is it and what are its implications for social care in ageing welfare states? In: <i>Social Sustainability in Ageing Welfare States</i> . Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 229–249.	Book chapter	Social policy
Büchs M (2025) Proposals for sustainable welfare policies. In: <i>The Eco-Social Polity?</i> Policy Press, pp. 169–180.	Book chapter	Social policy
Winston N, Jensen JO and Dingley O (2025) Combating residential energy poverty in existing dwellings: eco-social policies and sustainable welfare in Denmark and Ireland. In: <i>The Eco-Social Polity?</i> Policy Press, pp. 196–209.	Book chapter	Social policy
Büchs M (2021) Sustainable welfare: How do universal basic income and universal basic services compare? <i>Ecological Economics</i> 189: 107152.	Journal article	Economics
Dengler C and Lang M (2022) Commoning Care: Feminist Degrowth Visions for a Socio-Ecological Transformation. <i>Feminist Economics</i> 28(1). Routledge: 1–28.	Journal article	Economics
Pagani A, Walker A, Macmillan A, et al. (2026) Identifying leverage points in the social housing system: Housing associations on the path towards degrowth? <i>Ecological Economics</i> 241: 108841.	Journal article	Economics
Vogel J, Guerin G, O'Neill DW, et al. (2024) Safeguarding livelihoods against reductions in economic output. <i>Ecological Economics</i> 215: 107977.	Journal article	Economics
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