



The Social Protection Committee

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A VOLUNTARY QUALITY FRAMEWORK FOR SOCIAL SERVICES

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed a growing interest among public authorities, service providers, users and other stakeholders in the debate on the quality of social services.

This interest is directly related to the processes of reforms in which Member States have engaged in this area in the last decades and in particular to the increased outsourcing of the social services' provision, which calls for a better definition by public authorities of the service at stake and of the expected quality requirements.

Better defining social services' quality also responds to the need to address a demand for social services that is becoming more complex and diverse as well as to the need to protect social services' vulnerable users.

Moreover, as the quality of the service is closely related to the skills of social workers, the debate on social services' quality can help identifying skills and training requirements and thus, contribute to the further development of the "white-jobs" sector.

Finally, the cross-border provision of social services, presently very limited but expected to grow, in particular in the area of long-term care, will call for a greater level of service comparability and transparency.

The present document proposes a voluntary European Quality Framework which aims at being a reference for defining, assuring, improving and evaluating the quality of social services. It should help policy-makers and public authorities organising and financing social services, to develop at the appropriate level specific tools for the measurement and evaluation of social services' quality.

The European Quality Framework is flexible enough to be applied in the national, regional and local context in all the EU Member States and to a variety of social services. It aims at being compatible and complementary with existing national quality approaches in the sector.

The document has been inspired by various initiatives concerning social services' quality: (i) the frameworks and tools which have been put in place by public authorities in the Member States, (ii) the initiatives already launched by the EU stakeholders,

(iii) the Active Inclusion initiative¹; (iv) the results of eight projects financed by PROGRESS on the quality of social service; (v) the position paper issued in November 2007 by the Disability High Level Group providing guidance on how to promote quality social services addressing the particular needs of people with disabilities.

Moreover, when drafting the document, the experts nominated by the Member States have benefitted from the experience and have taken into account the expectations of various actors from the civil society, of organisations representing both the users and the providers of social services as well as European umbrella organisations representing local public authorities.

The document consists of three parts: (i) an introduction to the concept of social services (**Chapter 2**) ; (ii) a set of quality principles covering various aspects of service provision that could help developing a common understanding of social services' quality within the EU (**Chapter 3**); (iii) elements for a methodology on quality tools (**Chapter 4**).

2. THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

The Commission Communication on social services of general interest of April 2006² provides the following definition of social services:

In addition to health services [...] we find two main categories of social services:

- statutory and complementary social security schemes, organised in various ways (mutual or occupational organisations), covering the main risks of life, such as those linked to health, ageing, occupational accidents, unemployment, retirement and disability;
- other essential services provided directly to the person. These services that play a preventive and social cohesion role consist of customised assistance to facilitate social inclusion and safeguard fundamental rights. They comprise, first of all, assistance for persons faced by personal challenges or crises (such as debt, unemployment, drug addition or family breakdown). Secondly, they include activities to ensure that the persons concerned are able to completely reintegrate into society (rehabilitation, language training for immigrants) and, in particular, the labour market (occupational training and reintegration). These services complement and support the role of families in caring for the youngest and oldest members of society in particular. Thirdly, these services include activities to integrate persons with long-term health or disability problems. Fourthly, they also include social housing, providing housing for disadvantaged citizens or socially less advantaged groups.

Although their scope and organisation vary significantly according to historical and cultural specificities, social services are essential for the fulfilment of basic EU objectives, such as the achievement of social, economic and territorial cohesion, social

¹ See Commission Recommendation of 3 October 2008 on the "Active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market", (2008/867/EC) published in the O.J. of 18.11.2008 L. 307/11; Council conclusions on common active inclusion principles to combat poverty more effectively of 17.12.2008; and the European Parliament resolution of 6 May 2009 on the active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market (2008/2335(INI).

² *Implementing the Community Lisbon programme: Social services of general interest in the European Union*, COM(2006) 177 final.

inclusion, a high level of employment and economic growth. They are key instruments for the safeguard of fundamental human rights and human dignity and contribute to ensuring the creation of equal opportunities for all, therefore enhancing the capacity of individuals to fully participate in the society.

Very often, these services are considered by the public authorities in the Member States as being of general interest and subject to specific public service requirements. Examples of social services are social assistance services, long-term care, childcare, employment and training services, personal assistants and social housing.

In its Communication of November 2007 on services of general interest and on social services of general interest³, the Commission identified a set of objectives and principles of organisation concerning social services (see box below).

Objectives and principles of organisation of social services

Social services are often meant to achieve a number of specific aims:

- they are person-oriented services, designed to respond to vital human needs, in particular the needs of users in vulnerable position;
- they provide protection from general as well as specific risks of life and assist in personal challenges or crises;
- they are also provided to families in a context of changing family patterns, support their role in caring for both young and old family members, as well as for people with disabilities, and compensate possible failings within the families;
- they are key instruments for the safeguard of fundamental human rights and human dignity;
- they play a preventive and socially cohesive role, which is addressed to the whole population, independently of wealth or income;
- they contribute to non-discrimination, to gender equality, to human health protection, to improving living standards and quality of life and to ensuring the creation of equal opportunities for all, therefore enhancing the capacity of individuals to fully participate in the society.

These aims are reflected in the ways in which these services are organised, delivered and financed:

- in order to address the multiple needs of people as individuals, social services must be comprehensive and personalised, conceived and delivered in an integrated manner;
- they often involve a personal relationship between the recipient and the

³ *Services of general interest, including social services of general interest: a new European commitment*, COM(2007) 725 final.

service provider;

- the definition and delivery of a service must take into account the diversity of users;
- when responding to the needs of vulnerable users, social services are often characterised by an asymmetric relationship between providers and beneficiaries which is different from a commercial supplier / consumer relationship;
- as these services are often rooted in (local) cultural traditions, tailor-made solutions taking into account the particularities of the local situation are chosen, guaranteeing proximity between the service provider and the user while ensuring equal access to services across the territory;
- service providers often need a large autonomy to address the variety and the evolving nature of social needs;
- these services are generally driven by the principle of solidarity and are highly dependent on public financing, so as to ensure equality of access, independent of wealth or income;
- non-profit providers as well as voluntary workers often play an important role in the delivery of social services, thereby expressing citizenship capacity and contributing to social inclusion, the social cohesion of local communities and to intergenerational solidarity.

Finally, social services account for a significant share of employment and represent an important source of job creation in the EU. Thus, the share of employment in health and social services grew from 8.7% to 9.6% between 2000 and 2007, which means that almost 3.3 million new jobs in the health and social services sector were created in this period. [NOTA BENE: The data will be updated before the finalisation of the document]. Moreover, available data show that social services play an essential role in combating poverty and social exclusion⁴.

3. QUALITY PRINCIPLES FOR SOCIAL SERVICES

The present chapter presents quality principles referring to the characteristics of the services provided (**section 3.1**) as well as quality principles on the following dimensions of service provision: (i) the relationships between service providers and users (**section 3.2**); (ii) the relationships between service providers, public authorities and other stakeholders (**section 3.3**); and (iii) human and physical capital (**section 3.4**). For each of the quality principles concerning the dimensions of service provision, operational criteria

⁴ "How Social Services Help Mobilising the Workforce and Strengthening Social Cohesion. Background information" paper presented at the Ministerial Conference on "Social Services – A Tool for Mobilising the Workforce and Strengthening Social Cohesion" organised by the Czech EU Presidency, Prague, 22-23 April 2009.

which might be of help for the monitoring and evaluation of social services' quality have been identified.

These quality principles, voluntary in nature, are addressed to public authorities in charge of developing, financing and organising social services. They are also addressed to service providers in so far as they concern the delivery of social services. Thus, these principles aim at developing a common language on social services quality and at facilitating the exchange of experiences and good practices.

3.1. Characteristics of the service provided:

- **Available:** Access to a wide range of social services should be facilitated so as to provide users with freedom of choice and with an appropriate response to their needs, at a location which is most beneficial to the users and the family.
- **Accessible:** Social services should be easy to access by all those who may require them. Information about the service should be accessible to all users. People with disabilities should be ensured accessibility to the physical environment, transport, information and communication (including information and communication technologies).
- **Affordable:** Social services should be provided to all the persons who need them (universal access) either free of charge or at an affordable price.
- **Person-centred:** Social services should address in a timely and flexible manner the changing needs of each individual with the aim of improving their quality of life as well as of ensuring equal opportunities. Social services should take into account the physical, intellectual and social environment of the users and should be respectful of their cultural specificities. Furthermore, they should be driven by the needs of the users and, when appropriate, of the related beneficiaries of the service provided.
- **Comprehensive:** Social services should be conceived and delivered in an integrated manner which reflects the multiple needs, capacities and preferences of the users, their families and carers, and which aims to improve their well-being.
- **Continuous:** Social services should be organised so as to ensure continuity of service delivery for the duration of the need and, particularly when responding to developmental and long-term needs, according to a life-cycle approach that enables the users to rely on a continuous, uninterrupted range of services, from early interventions to support and follow up, while avoiding the negative impact of disruption of service.
- **Outcome oriented:** Social services should be focused primarily on the benefits for the users, but also for their families, care givers and community. Service delivery should be optimised on the basis of periodic evaluations channelling into the organisation feedback from users and stakeholders.

3.2. Relationships between service providers and users:

- **Respect for users' rights:** Service providers should respect the fundamental rights and freedoms as outlined in national, European and international human rights

instruments⁵, as well as the dignity of the users. Moreover, they should promote and implement the users' rights in terms of equal opportunities, equal treatment, freedom of choice, self-determination, control of their own lives and equal opportunities. Services should be provided without discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation. Physical, mental and financial abuse of vulnerable users should be prevented and adequately sanctioned.

Quality criteria

- ❖ *providing potential and actual users of social services, as well as their families, with clear, accurate and accessible information about all major aspects of available services;*
 - ❖ *informing users and their families about the types, availability, extent and limitations of the services provided;*
 - ❖ *implementing transparent, accessible and user-friendly advice and complaint procedures for users;*
 - ❖ *setting up regulatory frameworks and control mechanisms to avoid physical, psychological or financial abuse and to ensure compliance with health and safety rules;*
 - ❖ *providing staff and volunteers involved in service delivery with adequate training in rights-based, person-centred service provision of everyday care and in avoidance of discrimination;*
 - ❖ *ensuring confidentiality of data regarding users and services provided to them.*
- **Participation and empowerment:** Service providers should encourage the active involvement of users, their families and care givers in the decisions regarding the planning, delivery and evaluation of services. The service provision should empower users to define their personal needs and should aim to strengthen or maintain their capacities.

Quality criteria

- ❖ *ensuring involvement of the users, of their representatives and, when appropriate, of their families in planning, development, delivery, monitoring and evaluation of service, when necessary by providing adequate support;*
- ❖ *engaging in dialogue with organisations representing the users and involving them in the decision making system;*
- ❖ *establishing periodical review of users' satisfaction with the services provided and with the staff performance.*

⁵ See notably the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

3.3. Relationships between service providers, public authorities and other stakeholders:

- **Partnership:** The development of community-based social service provision requires the active involvement of all stakeholders from both the public and the private sectors: service users, their families and care givers, users' organisations, service providers and their representative organisations, civil society organisations operating in the local community, local authorities, employers and trade unions. This partnership is essential for the creation of a continuum of social services that respond to local needs, for the effective use of resources and expertise, as well as for achieving social cohesion.

Quality criteria

- ❖ *establishing synergies between all stakeholders in the community, concerning policymaking, needs identification, planning, development, delivery, monitoring and evaluation of services so as to ensure the continuity of social service provision for the duration of the need and to facilitate users' access to a comprehensive range of social services and to ensure that the service contributes to an inclusive society;*
 - ❖ *bringing the service provider as close as possible to the service users.*
- **Good governance:** Social services should operate on the basis of openness and transparency, respect for the European, national, regional and local legislation, efficiency and accountability in relation to organisational and financial performance of service delivery. Service provision should be based on the coordination of the relevant public authorities in the design, proper financing and delivery of the service.

Quality criteria

- ❖ *clearly defining roles, responsibilities and interrelations between the actors involved in planning, development, financing, delivery, support, monitoring and evaluation of service;*
- ❖ *ensuring regular planning and review processes and putting in place mechanisms for systematic continuous improvement;*
- ❖ *collecting periodic feedback on the efficiency of service provision from users, purchasers, funders and other stakeholders as well as from potential users who might be excluded from the service;*
- ❖ *establishing regular independent review of procedures, outcomes, staff performance and users' satisfaction and publishing their results;*
- ❖ *implementing transparent, accessible and user-friendly advice and complaint procedures for users;*
- ❖ *organising participatory forums involving service users and their networks, public authorities, civil society organisations and other stakeholders in the assessment of service providers' performance.*

3.4. Human and physical capital:

- **Good working conditions/Investment in human capital:** Social service should be provided by skilled and competent carers (professionals or volunteers) working under stable and acceptable conditions in a good working environment and with a manageable caseload.

Quality criteria

- ❖ *setting up, taking into account the role of the social partners, a coherent regulatory framework that ensures decent working conditions, non-discrimination and gender equality, as well as acceptable wage-structure and equal pay for equal work for professional carers;*
 - ❖ *promoting recruitment and retention policies that promote the selection of qualified personnel with required knowledge, skills and competence;*
 - ❖ *establishing training programmes for staff and volunteers in the necessary professional and inter-personal skills, on respect of fundamental rights and avoidance of discrimination, on awareness of the specificities and rights of the groups of people they provide services to, on accessibility and assistive technology;*
 - ❖ *involving users and family carers in the development of such training programmes;*
 - ❖ *developing life-long learning schemes for the staff;*
 - ❖ *ensuring the certification and continuous development of staff competences;*
 - ❖ *making staff members actively involved in a partnership approach to the development, delivery and evaluation of services, together with their representative trade unions.*
- **Adequate physical infrastructure:** Social service should be provided within adequate physical infrastructures respecting health and safety standards, accessibility standards following "Design for All" approaches as well as environmental requirements.

Quality criteria

- ❖ *ensuring that physical infrastructures are adequate and comply with health and safety standards and with environmental requirements;*
- ❖ *promoting accessibility standards following "Design for All" approaches and environmental requirements;*
- ❖ *ensuring that all users, including people with disabilities, have easy access to the physical infrastructures and to adequate means of transportation to and from them, as well as to means of information and communication regarding the provision of social services adapted to their needs.*

4. ELEMENTS FOR A METHODOLOGY ON QUALITY TOOLS

The aim of the present chapter is to provide methodological elements that public authorities in the Member States can use for the development, at the appropriate level, of quality tools (standards, indicators, operational criteria ...) for the definition, measurement and evaluation of social services quality. While these methodological elements can be of use for the public authorities, it will be for them to develop and employ the quality tools at stake, in line with their needs and specific circumstances.

These methodological elements build notably on the reflection on indicators and statistics conducted within the OMC⁶. In line with the approach used in that context⁷, the following methodological criteria are highlighted:

- a quality tool should capture the essence of what the service aims to achieve and have a clear and accepted normative interpretation;
- a quality tool should be robust and statistically validated;
- a quality tool should provide a sufficient level of cross-countries comparability, as far as practicable with the use of internationally applied definitions and data collection standards;
- a quality tool should be built on available underlying data, and be timely and susceptible to revision;
- a quality tool should be responsive to policy interventions but not subject to manipulation.

Moreover, methodological elements are suggested along the following six dimensions: i) definition; ii) scope; iii) validity; iv) cross-country comparability; v) data availability and vi) responsiveness.

4.1. Definition

- The quality tools should address the aims of service provision in a given context and reflect accurately the specificities of that context.
- Providing a clear and accepted operational definition of quality tools requires an in-depth analysis of the specific issues regarding service provision.
- Depending on their nature, quality tools can be objective or subjective, quantitative or qualitative, and thus three types of quality tools can be distinguished:
 - ❖ **quantitative and objective tools** – defined as numerically measurable values;

⁶ See the *Portfolio of Overarching Indicators and Streamlined Social Inclusion, Pensions and Health Portfolios*, , adopted by the Social Protection Committee in June 2006, and the *Portfolio of Indicators for the Monitoring of the European Strategy for Social Protection and Social Inclusion – 2009 Update*, adopted by the Social Protection Committee in September 2009.

⁷ It is worth noting that the indicators developed within the OMC aim at the evaluation of Member States policy. While the present exercise concerns methodological elements for the development of tools to be used for defining and measuring the quality of social services, the approach developed within the OMC provides useful inspiration also in this context.

- ❖ **qualitative and objective tools** – which are not numerically measurable but require objectively verifiable responses (presence or absence of a situation, status, characteristic, law/rule/procedure etc.);
- ❖ **qualitative and subjective tools** – which refer to an assessment or an opinion (level of satisfaction, confidence, values, awareness etc.).
- The definition of a quality tool should be clear in order to avoid ambiguities that might arise especially in the case of qualitative or subjective tools and should be commonly accepted in order to allow for the consistent collection and for the cross-country comparability of the data.

4.2. Scope

- Analysing the collected data in a comparative perspective leads to the identification of dynamic aspects such as trends, strong and weak points, thresholds reached, gaps in continuity (input), making it thus possible to set objectives, determine priorities and draft a strategy for regulatory or remedial action (process), as well as to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the implemented actions (output). The following types of quality tools might capture the interaction between various factors affecting social service provision:
 - ❖ **input quality tools** assess the characteristics of social service provision. They represent necessary conditions for the delivery of high-quality social services but they do not ensure that appropriate processes are carried out or that satisfactory outputs are achieved;
 - ❖ **process-related quality tools** measure the delivery of social services and offer an evidence-based assessment of their quality. Thus, they represent the closest approximation of the actual service provision;
 - ❖ **output quality tools** assess the degree to which the social service provision addresses users' needs and influences their well-being. However, output tools may be influenced by other factors than the quality of social service provision, factors which should be accounted for by risk adjustment.

4.3. Validity

- The quality tools should be logically coherent (face validity), should be correlated to other measures of the same quality principles of social service provision (construct validity) and should capture meaningful aspects of high-quality social service provision (content validity).

4.4. Cross-country comparability

- Quality tools should be measurable in a comparable perspective in order to allow for peer reviews and for meaningful exchanges of good practices concerning social service provision within and among the Member States. In order to allow for an adequate level of cross-country comparability, quality tools should be expressed by a numerical, logical or categorical value in a consistent manner, regardless of their nature (subjective or objective, qualitative or quantitative). This is important not only for reasons of comparability but also because it enables

statistical calculations that may improve the relevance of the tools and the reliability of the data.

- Given the social and institutional diversity among Member States, quality tools that are over-sensitive to structural variation or raise specific problems of data collection and interpretation should be avoided.

4.5. Data availability

- The availability of sources and data is crucial, since the development of certain tools depends on establishing comparisons over time, while the collection of data for tools that are not routinely measured in all Member States can be time- and resource-consuming. The development of quality tools should, wherever possible, make use of information already supplied by the national, European and international institutions and organisations. In case new information is needed, it should be obtained as far as possible by using existing data collection instruments.
- The availability of data depends also on the nature of tools:
 - ❖ for **quantitative and objective quality tools**, data can be found in official statistics carried out by national statistical institutes, international organisations and Eurostat;
 - ❖ for **qualitative and objective quality tools**, useful sources of data are compilations of administrative data at local, regional, national and European level, studies, reports and evaluations financed by the Commission and/or produced by advocacy groups, users' organisations, think tanks, NGOs and expert networks, as well as peer reviews and regular exchanges of information on best practices;
 - ❖ for **qualitative and subjective quality tools**, data can be provided by national statistical institutes that conduct surveys, by opinion polls institutes or by the Eurobarometer. In case specific data are not available, they can be obtained via ad-hoc surveys, questionnaires, user surveys, complaints management systems. The collection of data from sample surveys should comply with the best practices of survey research methodology and should minimise errors arising from ambiguous questions, misleading definitions, bias resulting from non-response and interviewer/coder mistakes.

4.6. Responsiveness

- The quality tools should accurately measure the relevance and effectiveness of the implemented actions with respect to the objectives pursued by the quality principles, the extent to which they address the users' needs and their vulnerability to risks, liabilities and threats that might affect the duration of service provision. At the same time, the quality tools should not be easily subject to manipulation by artificial policy interventions.

4.7. Conclusions

Following this methodological approach should result in developing a set of quality tools that respect a common identification pattern in order to ensure cross-country comparability:

- Name and definition
- Type (quantitative objective, qualitative objective or qualitative subjective)
- Scale (numerical, logical or categorical, for which the units of measurements and range of responses have been previously agreed upon)
- Scope (capturing input, process or output aspects of social service provision)
- Data sources