

Memorandum on a European Quality Principles Framework EQPF

Improving the quality of services to improve the quality of lives of people with disabilities and their families

Preamble

In the last decade major political, economic, social and technological changes have taken place in Europe and all over the globe. These changes have also had their impact on policymaking regarding people with disabilities and on the support service sector. A fundamental shift has taken place from the medical model that stresses disability to a social and human rights model that aims at full citizenship; a paradigm shift from patient to citizen, from segregation to inclusion. This shift is clearly expressed in three of the main legislative instruments for the disability sector: the UN Convention on Disabilities, the Council of Europe Disability Action Plan and the Disability Action Plan of the EU and also fits in the general rules outlined in article 13 of the EU Treaty.

At the same time there have been major changes in the way people with disabilities and their families are perceived and included in decisions about their lives. In its April 2006 Communication on Social Services of General Interest, the European Commission mentions a general trend towards modernization and quality. Indeed, modernization of services for people with a disability and of social services in general is high on the agenda of authorities and policy makers at all levels. Social services are a major source of economic growth and job creation. Moreover, they drive and put into practice innovation in the social sector and they are major contributors to social inclusion and social cohesion. They are also the focus of an intensive quest for quality and effectiveness.

All the Member States have embarked upon modernization of their social services to tackle the tensions between universality, quality and financial sustainability. This therefore clearly affects the sector of service provision for people with disabilities: a change in management culture and approaches is taking place. Across Europe, there is an emerging and strong tendency to identify quality by the outcomes of a service instead of focusing on the input and processes. High quality services should facilitate full participation, inclusion in society and full citizenship of people with disabilities. This means that the outcome of a service must be evaluated and measured by verifying the impact the service has on the person with a disability and the extent to which the service really addresses the needs expressed by the people with disabilities. This "Quality of life" approach sets the scene for the evaluation of the quality of a service and for the establishment of good quality assurance systems.

Purpose of this Memorandum

Service Providers in Europe respond to the needs of over 50 million people (10 % of the EU population) with a disability in the EU. The sector employs over 4 million people directly and another 4 million people in an indirect way. The vast majority of the service providers represented by EASPD members are social profit small/medium size enterprises (SMEs).

The main objective of EASPD is to promote the equalisation of opportunities for people with disabilities and to improve the quality of lives. EASPD believes that social service providers have a major role to

play in partnership with people with disabilities and their families. Together they can contribute to the realisation of these objectives through effective and high quality service systems.

EASPD believes in interdependence and partnership between service users and their families, providers and authorities at all levels to tackle the challenges ahead. Therefore, a meaningful and correctly implemented stakeholder approach is a must. This requires a joint agreement on needs and how they should be met and innovative policy development that will better reflect the needs and aspirations of people with disabilities.

Within this Memorandum, EASPD particularly wants to emphasise that:

- we believe that it is important and timely to review the issue of service quality;
- we are committed to working in partnership with people with disabilities and their families to protect and improve the quality of their lives;
- we are launching this Memorandum to encourage debate and develop a shared consensus between EASPD members and with all key stakeholders on how to define, measure, implement and improve quality;
- we want this Memorandum to be an important step in supporting the European Commission in producing a European Union policy on Quality – such a clear policy would help establish legislative requirements and policy expectations regarding quality of services.

Quality Assurance and Accreditations Systems

EASPD believes the best way for the EU to ensure high quality service provision in Europe is to establish consensus on European quality principles instead of quality standards. Quality standards could be implemented on the national or regional level, but quality principles are the most effective on the EU level.

Of course objective and measurable quality standards are needed when developing social services. Services should be managed by well-trained professionals. First line staff should have life long learning opportunities, governance principles should be implemented in a transparent way, service users and families must be involved and have a strong say, complaint procedures have to be available, there must be proper attention to health and safety and so on.

However, an exclusive quality standards approach can also have a negative impact:

- Quality standards give the wrong impression that quality is a static issue that either can be reached or cannot be reached;
- Precise EU standards cannot properly reflect the diversity of the EU;
- Quality standards measurement is focused on achieving the minimum. It does not encourage and absorb innovative practice and shared learning;
- Quality standards give the false impression that one can measure quality without regard to the social and personal environment;
- Quality standards do not respect cultural diversity nor local circumstances;
- Quality standards tend to look only at input and throughput.

EASPD members are convinced that the best way to ensure high quality service provision in and across Europe is to adopt quality of life (QOL) principles as the defining values and to then apply these to specific national and local levels..

QOL principles are universal. What such principles hold dear are elements such as equality, full participation, inclusion, empowerment, creating opportunities, offering choices and supporting people with disabilities in shaping their own lives. QOL is about a positive approach towards working with and listening to people with disabilities.

EASPD therefore proposes to provide a general framework to measure QOL. The results should not be a fixed set of quality standards but rather directions to an ongoing process of improvement.

This Memorandum does not endorse or recommend any specific quality accreditation system. Promoting one particular system brings the danger of not respecting national and cultural diversity and the size and focus of different organisations.

At the same time EASPD believes that a credible quality system must contain the following elements and principles:

a) Values

First, high quality services must be based on – amongst others – the following key values which underpin the principles of the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, the *Treaty of Amsterdam*, the *EU Charter of Fundamental Rights* and the *Council of Europe Disability Action Plan*.

The right to:

- Dignity
- Equal opportunities
- Independent living
- Participation in and contribution to society

b) Quality of life for all

Secondly, EASPD believes that quality of life should be measured against a range of key domains so that it fully reflects the range of human experience. These domains must at least include:

- Emotional well-being
- Interpersonal relations
- Material well-being
- Personal development
- Physical well-being
- Self-determination
- Social inclusion
- Equal rights

c) Indications of quality

Third, there are three complementary indicators of quality which apply to all these domains: *subjective indicators*, *objective indicators* and *organisational indicators*. Subjective indicators focus on personal responses and rating of satisfaction. Objective indicators focus on a range of external environmentally based conditions. Objective indicators can be neutrally measured and compared. Organisational indicators are essential to ensure efficiency and sustainability of social services.

Subjective indicators are essential because they guarantee the direct participation of people with disabilities and their families. This is a fundamental component of services whose purpose it is to support people. However, because people adjust to circumstances, they are not sufficient since they may not properly measure how well objective life conditions meet personal goals.

Objective indicators are a complement, not an alternative, to subjective indicators. They can be measured against specific standards and compared between different groups and over different periods of time.

Organisational indicators, concerned with managerial aspects such as financial circumstances, the level of staff training and others, are equally important to assure high quality of services. These indicators are based on principles of good governance, efficiency and sustainability of the social service.

EASPD believes that a robust European Quality Principles Framework must be based on a combination of all these indicators. All indicators must reflect evidence based best practice.

d) Setting of targets and the measurement of change

A valid model of service quality must not be based on static or minimum standards. Quality is a journey, not a fixed abode. Therefore, such a model must be dynamic and developmental. A valid model of service quality must enable organisations to pinpoint what needs to be improved. Furthermore, it must provide organisations with guidance on how to achieve improvement. The model must be able to demonstrate whether such improvement has been achieved or not.

Conclusion

EASPD wants to promote a **EUROPEAN QUALITY PRINCIPLES FRAMEWORK (EQPF)** as the basis for service delivery in Europe. The EQPF should be supported by local quality standards which reflect these principles and practices.

The European Quality Principles Framework should also be based on the direct link between quality of lives and quality of services. Only high quality services can contribute to high quality of lives. For that reason, the three different quality indicators - subjective, objective *and* organisational - must be implemented and applied.

Furthermore, the EQPF needs to be active and developmental instead of rigid and permanent. We want to stress that this Memorandum does not endorse or recommend any specific quality accreditation system. The focus is on quality principles serving as a guideline in service provision all over Europe and not on quality standards.

Finally, developing a European Quality Principles Framework requires a fundamental understanding of the concept of Quality of Life and taking into consideration key values such as dignity, equal opportunities, independent living, full participation in and contribution to society. High quality services should be built on these values.

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