

Social Public Services: Quality of Working Life and Quality of Service – Overview of developments in Ireland, Sweden, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Portugal

Summary

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EUROPEAN FOUNDATION
for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions

This report gives an overview of the key changes and policy innovations that are taking place in the social public services in Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal and Sweden. It focuses particularly on the restructuring of social public services in the light of the growing demands, evolving risks and the multi-faceted needs associated with social exclusion and evaluates the impact of these changes on the quality of services and the quality of working life. The role of these shifting policy discourses are examined in relation to three client groups who face high levels social exclusion and for whom services are being reoriented in the light of a growing recognition that the needs and risks associated with dependency, social exclusion and disadvantage. They are dependent elderly people, disadvantaged young unemployed people and people with learning disabilities and mental illnesses.

Of importance to the study is the evaluation of mechanisms to improve the co-ordination and integration of services at national and local levels, the role of partnerships in policy formulation, the identification of needs, user-empowerment strategies and the shifting organisational and funding regimes leading towards new service provision. The report examines a number of examples of good practice and makes recommendations about the future development of social public services across Europe particularly as they relate to the quality of services and the quality of working life.

The report is divided into three sections.

Section one shows that the restructuring of social public services in the five countries studied has led to a number of key areas of convergence in policy. Despite vastly differing regimes of policy, organisation, funding, family and household structures, and varying levels of state intervention a number of commonalties can be identified in a trend towards service restructuring and reform.

- First, is the growing awareness of the need for co-ordinated and integrated responses to tackling social exclusion that has resulted in national anti-poverty policy frameworks or strategies in all five countries. Some of these have greater local applicability than others this has resulted in different levels and types of state intervention.
- Second, is the movement towards more user empowerment strategies and a greater attempt to identify user needs in a climate of the priority to promote independence and autonomy, and therefore reduce welfare dependency.
- Third, the recognition of the particular, complex and multi-faceted needs associated with the most extreme forms of disadvantage has led the greater targeting of resources towards hitherto hidden problems and disadvantages. This has resulted in the reorganisation of state policies that focus on decentralisation and de-institutionalisation in order to target resources where they are most needed at local and community levels.
- Fourth, overriding these are new claims to services resulting from the active involvement of users, their advocates and families, and voluntary and community organisations who are asserting a new politics of articulation shaped in active, subjective and reflexive user identities.
- Fifth, this has put major pressures on unresponsive, bureaucratic and professional run services towards more citizen friendly and accessible services. The result is that all five countries have or are embarking on major reforms of public administration.
- Sixth, is a growing trend towards a mixed economy of provision, much greater contracting out of services to private and semi-public agencies, and a growth of provision in the social economy where a growing level of provision is provided directly by community and voluntary organisations. Along with the need to provide more citizen

friendly services has been the need to ensure that the quality of services in the increasingly diversified mixture of provision is not only improved but also made relevant to user needs and priorities. The result is that all five countries have, to differing degrees, been instigating major quality improvement initiatives, ranging from quality standards set at the national level to locally developed quality standards developed in partnership with providers and users of services. These developments have led to a greater level of service innovation and experimentation with new models of delivery. Central to these has been the shift to services that are locally based, responsive to a variety of different and increasingly complex needs, and which are resulting in projects and strategies to integrate and co-ordinate service provision in ways that are appropriate to local people and local communities.

- Finally, and of crucial importance is that these developments have led to new employment practices, changing employment patterns, changes in work organisation and new thinking about how work can be organised in the climate of restructuring. Moreover, this has coincided with the need to ensure that working conditions also relate to the needs of women and families and accord with equal opportunities. At its worst the restructuring of services has led to a greater intensity of work, low staff morale, poorer working conditions, negative forms of flexibility and increasing pressures at work. At its best service restructuring has brought with it new opportunities to restructure work, new forms of partnerships between workers and managers, new concepts of learning organisations and lifelong learning, and positive forms of flexibility and equal opportunities that improve not only the quality of work, but link this to developing quality services.

In section two the restructuring of services to meet the needs of the three client groups are examined in more detail. It is in the care sector that the greatest mixture of services is in evidence as all five countries attempt to provide local community based responses to care. This has led to innovations and reforms that aim to decentralise resources, resource voluntary organisations and informal carers and empower users. The objective is to enable dependent elderly people, people with learning disabilities and people with mental illnesses to remain in their own homes or local communities for as long as possible. In some cases this had led to the identification of unmet and new needs in others it is to ensure that the care provided meets the needs of users within a climate of cost-containment.

In particular, this has led to a number of new innovations in providing integrated local services and a greater degree of user choice and independence. For young disadvantaged people there is also a growing recognition that traditional vocational services are inappropriate and ineffective in tackling multiple forms of disadvantage. This has resulted in a shift in policy towards the most disadvantaged young people, for example, to new strategies to tackle early school leaving and educational disadvantage amongst young people, or to tackle criminality and drug abuse and thereby support the integration and reintegration of young people into work and society. This section also shows that the integration of services and development of meaningful quality frameworks are an important route to meeting these multiple needs.

In section three seven examples of good practice are documented. These show, to varying degrees and in different contexts, the importance of integrated and co-ordinated responses to improved service delivery need and the meeting of unmet need. They reflect a range of examples from each of the five countries and each of the three client groups studied. It is clear that these examples provide some interesting models of good practice that can be further

explored at the European level. The examples outline issues related the quality of service, the participation of users and workers, the resourcing of the initiatives, the quality of work and the possibilities for the wider dissemination of the good practice.

In section four, the report draws on some key conclusions, lessons to be drawn from some of the examples of good practice and innovation in the different countries and recommendations for the development of social public services across Europe.

- First, these relate to the implications of restructuring on working conditions, working time, work organisation, and equal opportunities in a climate of ensuring the effective management of change. A number of recommendations are made regarding trade union and employer policies as restructuring brings both into new relationships with each other and with clients and users of services.
- Second, it is recommended that user empowerment strategies are further developed and more systematic ways of identifying user needs be introduced.
- Third, improved monitoring and evaluation of services improvements is recommended, particularly to ensure that service improvements are relevant to both providers and users of services.
- Fourth, a greater resourcing of partnership working is recommended in order to ensure that partnerships are truly representative of all stakeholders, particularly those from the voluntary and community sectors.
- Fifth, a number of recommendations are made for improving integrated and co-ordinated service delivery at local levels and for mainstreaming successful pilots, experiments and innovations.
- Sixth, a number of recommendations are made about making quality improvements meaningful and practical, particularly in ensuring that these are developed in a framework of participation.
- Finally, a number of important recommendations are made for the resourcing of restructuring, integration and partnership working methods.