

EPR Briefing

Building Quality Services: Improving Support for People with Disabilities in Europe

Considerations for the Upcoming European Framework on Social Services of Excellence for persons with disabilities

Introduction

This Briefing aims to present recommendations to inform the development and implementation of the upcoming European Commission's Framework on Social Services of Excellence for persons with disabilities. The European Platform for Rehabilitation (EPR) has actively contributed to the discussions which have taken place in the dedicated Disability Platform¹ Sub-group over 2024. EPR considers that, for the Framework to make a successful contribution to the sector, the points detailed below need to be considered. The arguments and recommendations proposed herein are the result of exchanges within EPR's Task Force on Quality run by the EPR Secretariat internally with EPR members and European Quality in Social Services (EQUASS) experts during 2024. In addition, the points raised in this Briefing are also based on the discussions held at the [EPR Public Affairs event](#) on 25 November 2024 "Building Better Services: Improving Assistance and Support for People with Disabilities in Europe".

Context: The upcoming Framework on Social Services of Excellence for persons with disabilities

Within the [European Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030](#), the European Commission has launched a series of priorities, flagship initiatives and deliverables to be carried out within the timeframe. These are meant to also contribute to achieving the 2030 EU headline targets proposed by the [European Pillar of Social Rights \(EPSR\) Action Plan](#). The upcoming Framework on Social Services of Excellence for persons with disabilities (hereafter referred to as 'the Framework') aligns with the priority area of the Disability Strategy on 'Decent quality of life and independent living'. It serves to complement the "[Guidance on independent living and inclusion in the community](#)" – released on 20 November 2024. These twin initiatives highlight the interdependence of quality support services and independent living.

Although the Framework has not yet been released, thanks to the consultations on its content via the Disability Platform, as well as the presentation delivered at the EPR Public Affairs event held in November 2024 in Brussels by the European Commission Directorate-General for Employment,

¹ The Framework is being developed in consultation with the Disability Platform subgroup. The [Disability Platform](#) establishes close cooperation between the institutions of the Member States, the Commission and the civil society on issues relating to disability and to facilitate the exchange of information, experiences and good practices.

Social Affairs and Inclusion, its key features can already be outlined for the purpose of this Briefing. Building on the 2010 [European Quality Framework for Social Services](#) proposed by the Social Protection Committee (SPC) and the European Commission, this Framework strives to improve service delivery for persons with disabilities and to enhance the attractiveness of jobs in this area including through upskilling and reskilling of service providers. Its scope covers mainstream services (e.g., public employment services) and specialised services (e.g., rehabilitation services, such as those offered by EPR members). Encompassing both these categories, its objective is to promote services which embrace quality/excellence (the two terms will be used interchangeably) principles, are fully accessible, are efficiently integrated and guarantee that human rights of service users are respected, in line with the [UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) (UN CRPD). The five thematic building blocks of the Framework are foreseen to be the following:

- Promoting suitable living arrangements and preventing institutionalisation;
- Shifting from institutional to person-centred approaches;
- Enhancing community inclusion through accessibility, orientation & combating stereotypes;
- Promoting consultation and participation of persons with disabilities;
- Enabling transformation in service provision.

The preparatory research for the Framework was conducted by the European Commission, with input from the European Disability Expertise (EDE), and published in 2023 with the synthesis report “[Disability relevance of quality assurance systems in social services](#)”. This report builds on evidence from 29 country reports on existing frameworks, definitions and assessment systems and procedures that are in place to measure the quality of social services used by persons with disabilities.

Delivering High Quality in Social Services for persons with disabilities: What are the starting points?

Essential Components to achieve Excellence

Social services play a fundamental role in ensuring well-being, Quality of Life, and access to opportunities for all individuals. Adhering to quality assurance systems can drive services towards continuous improvement and to focus on outcomes to the benefit of the service users’ autonomy and empowerment. Quality assurance provides a structured way to measure, evaluate, and enhance service effectiveness. Striving for excellence within service delivery implies moving away from focusing narrowly on compliance and towards measuring performance. Quality assurance requires a thorough investigation of the needs of service users to develop new programs - such as supported decision-making initiatives - and improving existing services, tools and materials accordingly.

Monitoring quality over time is crucial for identifying gaps in service provision and meeting people’s needs at all stages of life, ensuring continuity of service provision. With a quality focus on service delivery comes a renewed attention to an organisation’s values, orientation and functioning. Quality assurance should also include staff well-being and integrate risk management and outcome measurements, so as to enable organisations to set benchmarks and learn from others. For this to function effectively, it is essential that service users are involved in the process and that everyone having a role in service provision, service workers, managers and leadership, integrates the quality

aspect. In this way, working on quality fosters lifelong learning of staff and constant take up of new methods.

The premise for this Briefing includes a shared understanding by EPR members and EQUASS (EPR owned sector-specific quality certification system) associated experts that:

- quality assurance in social services must be systematic, embedded within the services development and delivery;
- quality systems should enable persons with a disability to enjoy their rights under the UN CRPD;
- quality within services requires respect for human rights and equitable access to services as preconditions for achieving excellence.

Challenges in delivering high-quality services for persons with disabilities

Ensuring access to quality social services is crucial for guarantying Quality of Life (see Quality of Life Background [here](#)), as well as contributing to the implementation of the EPSR. This is all the more relevant given the first EU Anti-Poverty strategy announced in July 2024 and set for 2024-2029 mandate of the European Commission. Although social services play an essential role in strengthening social cohesion and addressing social protection gaps, they face ongoing challenges, including but not limited to:

- shortage of skilled, competent and trained labour force, such as rehabilitation specialists;
- issues with staff retention and recruitment;
- shortage of adequate and long-term sustainable funding, especially in rural/remote areas;
- lack of technological investment that hampers innovation;
- long waiting lists to access services.

In order to provide affordable, high quality services, these challenges must be effectively overcome. The upcoming Framework is a timely tool to tackle and address them. It is also important to note that the provision of social services in Europe needs to adapt to evolving social needs and evolving modes of service delivery, including but not limited to:

- rapid changes in modes of service provision thanks to ICT advancements and AI;
- a shift to more personalised services delivered in community-based settings;
- increased mental health needs of younger demographics and a growing number of people with psychosocial disabilities;
- an ageing population with greater long-term care support needs.

In light of these emerging trends, ensuring the access to quality and affordable services is crucial, in a European Union committed to delivering on the ambitious target to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million by 2030 according to the [European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan](#).

As highlighted in the [European Commission Report “Disability-relevance of quality assurance systems in social services”](#), the existing 2010 Voluntary European Quality Framework for Social Services has not been widely adopted in Member States, although the principles of national quality assurance mechanisms often overlap with those of the EU framework (availability, accessibility,

affordability, person-centredness). Its uneven uptake highlighted the need for greater national-level commitment and grassroots engagement. When formulating the new Framework, it will be important to take into account the lessons learnt. To ensure that Member States implement the Framework, the EU can support its uptake by raising awareness and fostering mutual learning through fora such as the SPC and the Disability Platform.

Existing Quality Systems

Quality management and quality assurance systems - including but not limited to EQUASS, ISO and EFQM - are widely spread in the sector. Some are well known and frequently used all over Europe. Others are less prominent or less suitable for the sector. There are considerable differences amongst them regarding processes, types of assessments, prices and marketing strategies. Nonetheless, the use of principles, criteria (such as rights, ethics, person-centredness, partnership, leadership, staff, continuous improvement) and indicators is very common amongst them.

It is quite typical for a service provider organisation to constantly use five or more quality assurance systems and certifications in parallel and for different purposes/aspects of the work e.g. on care standards, safety standards, professional standards, etc. The availability of self-assessment tools has become very important for the take up of quality assurance systems.

Adhering to various quality assurance systems can be difficult. There may be a divergence between national quality frameworks and international and/or European ones, such as EQUASS or ISO. National standards are usually based on minimum requirements, whereas systems like EQUASS aim at high quality levels. Although there is a wide range of quality assurance systems readily available throughout Europe, the scene is fragmented and these do not always overlap. As a whole, any chosen system must foster the empowerment of service users and focus on meeting their needs at all stages of life. To this end, including the perspectives of service users in quality assurance systems helps ensure services meet high standards.

The experience with EQUASS has shown there is a need for accessible self-assessment tools including use of benchmarking and indicators. These tools should be accessible and adapted to service users. They form the starting point for participation of persons with disabilities in quality assurance monitoring. Experts agree that benchmarking should not be the end goal, but rather that it should be leveraged to facilitate exchange about learning experiences among service providers and users, to strive for continuous improvement in outcomes attained.

Recommendations for the upcoming Framework

The upcoming Framework for Social Services of Excellence for persons with disabilities is an opportunity to provide guidelines – at local, regional and national level - for quality assurance frameworks at EU level. Hence, EPR members engaged in the Task Force on Quality Services propose the following recommendations:

1. There is urgent need in the sector to move towards organising service provision through collaboration across different sectors and integrated efforts amongst different actors to ensure continuity of services available throughout a person's life. For this purpose, extensive **awareness-raising efforts and multi-stakeholder events** engaging services and national authorities could be organised to promote its dissemination in Member States. Piloting the

European Framework in Member States upon its release, and allocating dedicated budgets to ensure its uptake will be the first crucial steps to undertake.

2. To ensure excellence in service delivery, incentives can help to **go beyond minimum quality standards**. Nonetheless, motivation and external recognition are not enough to achieve this because making a commitment to a given quality assurance system is dependent on resources and leadership. Thus, effective internal resource allocation and a **decisive leadership** geared towards continuous improvement are needed. Likewise, the ambitions of services to reach high quality in their work should not be hampered by overburdensome regulations imposed, but rather supported by enabling frameworks at local, national and European level.
3. Adequate **funding** needs to be allocated to the development of quality services. Reflecting on the low uptake of the Voluntary Quality Framework by Member States, we recommend that this new Framework receives better visibility and sufficient financial support to ensure its success. Thus, the Framework should include funding mechanisms. Other than supporting the bulk of activities foreseen in service provisions, large-scale investment in pilot projects can also help to further develop services of excellence and/or introduce new service formats that yield comprehensive positive results and shift organisational culture towards one delivering high quality. The EU can have a positive impact by guiding investments by leveraging EU funding (e.g., ESF+, TSI) as a starting point for scaling up reforms with national funding. National authorities have an obligation to safeguard services of general interest including through public procurement, contracts and concessions. To complement this, European authorities can coordinate, inspire, improve and move forward policies and practices.
4. Quality assurance should be an integral part of service provision at all levels. Underlying principles should be aligned with the UN CRPD, **focusing on rights and measuring the impact on the Quality of Life of service users**. Rights of the service users should be placed at the core of service provision to empower them and enable their choices. While some indicators, like the concept of Quality of Life, remain broad, a functioning framework can still be established without needing complete alignment and harmonisation. There is a necessity of a balanced approach, combining general principles with specific guidance to help service providers and Member States enhance their quality assurance practices. For one, a positive impact on Quality of Life should be a central axis of evaluating service provision, as this is a key means to enable persons to live independently. The EU should provide **principles and examples** to guide Member States when implementing specific quality indicators within their own frameworks. These guidelines should still acknowledge that it is important to have multiple models to enrich the quality assurance landscape.
5. A quality assurance system needs a **practical tool** that assesses the implementation of these principles. Additionally, there should be support and advice for Member States that are less advanced in quality assurance, recognising their different starting points. Principles are accompanied by a monitoring process to ensure their effective implementation and to verify progress over time. Measuring in this sense requires a cyclic way of management: plan-do-check/learn-act. Data collection is being promoted to assess how the results of quality assessments are followed up by providers and to propose incentives or repercussions

accordingly. We stress that digital tools themselves are not enough to ensure excellence, thus they must be integrated within quality management systems that are deployed in service provision.

Measuring Excellence: Key Principles

To assess the quality of a social service, excellence principles are of essential importance. Here we provide the EPR understanding of four key principles to be encompassed in the Framework:

Person-centred approach

- Services should be **tailor-made** to their users and context-specific to their environment. Employing individualised pathways can effectively promote the empowerment of the person and improve their Quality of Life.
- Quality assurance systems must represent the views and feedback of individuals using the services. This begins with a thorough needs assessment, recognising that a person's needs may change over their lifetime, requiring ongoing re-evaluation and adaptation of activities.
- Every service user should have an individual plan that sets specific outcomes linked to the concept of Quality of Life. This personalised approach ensures that services are tailored to the needs, abilities and aspirations of each individual.
- Services of excellence should be flexible, recognising that not every person needs the same type of care and support. A **comprehensive lifelong approach** therefore requires effective service integration, either within the service provider's scope or through coordination with other providers.

Independent Living

- The European Framework should be guided by a **rights-based approach** and promote independent living and community inclusion of service users. This means a person can exercise choice over what service type best meets their needs, and has access to it.
- In principle, independent living is aimed at **achieving higher autonomy** for a person. For example, services can support individuals in sheltered homes to transition to independent living by progressively enhancing their autonomy through self-determined pathways.
- Services can play an important role in building the capacity of people to live as independently as possible, through education and development of essential skills. When a person lives in a community-based setting, a service should assist individuals in aspects of life where needed and leave room for autonomy over daily tasks.

Workforce and Good Governance

- Services of excellence should guarantee a **workforce that is both skilled and competent**, maintaining appropriate worker-to-user ratios and safeguarding workers' rights. This also requires protecting staff from abuse and harassment, and promoting ongoing professional development through lifelong learning. Regular training, clear communication of goals, recognising their contributions, and creating clear pathways for career progression all help maintain a motivated high-quality workforce.
- Management and governance of services should cultivate a culture that promotes internal corporate social responsibility. This means actively involving staff in decision-making processes to foster a **positive organisational culture and a commitment to quality**. Staff is recognised as vital resources for feedback; staff is engaged in the strategic planning,

development of activities, and continuous quality improvement initiatives. Conducting annual evaluations to assess staff competencies and development needs also ensures that staff are aligned with the organisation's goals.

- It must be acknowledged that, in order to provide the highest quality of services with the available means, service providers may have to make difficult choices regarding internal resource allocation for the aforementioned initiatives.
- Ensuring that staff are well-trained but also understand the ethical implications of their work is essential. Competent and **ethically aware staff** are better equipped to deliver high-quality, outcome-oriented services. Implementing a robust risk management policy helps in identifying potential risks and establishing acceptable thresholds to plan and mitigate these risks.
- Building **strong partnerships** with other service providers and stakeholders ensures a comprehensive and integrated approach to service delivery.

Outcome Oriented

- The leadership must establish a clear mission and vision that stresses **the importance of outcome orientation and continuous improvement**. This purpose-driven approach should permeate the organisation, ensuring that every level of staff understands and commits to the desired outcomes.
- It is crucial for organisations to clearly define what desired outcomes mean in the context of their services. Outcomes should be distinguished from process results, focusing on the impact on the service users' lives rather than just the completion of service delivery steps.
- Implementing a **systematic approach** to define and pursue outcomes is necessary. This includes setting clear, measurable short, medium and long-term goals and regularly evaluating progress toward them. Rigorous monitoring mechanisms can also foresee the development of key outcome indicators and benchmarks to guide goal-setting and measure the effectiveness and success of services.
- Organisations should continuously learn from others through **benchmarking** and adopting best practices. Staying updated with industry developments and innovations helps in refining services to better meet outcome goals while remaining value-driven.
- Regular reviewing and adjusting practices based on feedback and performance data on the outcomes for service users, ensures that the organisation remains focused on achieving and improving quality of their activities.

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