

EPR Public Affairs event

Building Better Services: Improving Assistance and Support for People with Disabilities in Europe

25 November 2024, 14:00 – 17:30 CET

La Maison Amazone | Brussels, Belgium

Report

Introduction

The EPR Public Affairs event 2024 kicked off with words from EPR Chairperson, **Patrick Ruppol**, and EPR Secretary General, **Alicia Gómez Campos**, who welcomed participants and introduced the main theme of the event: Building Better Services: Improving Assistance and Support for People with Disabilities in Europe. Being held on the 25 November International day against violence against women, mention was made to La Maison Amazone a local non profit hub of organisations in Brussels fighting for women rights.

Patrick Ruppol shared about the impact of tailored work placements for persons with disabilities. He emphasised the value of employment in fostering autonomy and economic enabling individuals to earn a salary and make autonomous choices. Alicia Gómez Campos followed with reflections on EPR and delivering excellence in services to people with disabilities. She highlighted the dual goals of having an impact on improving the quality of life for service users and fostering their autonomy. She defined excellence within EPR can be understood as as a process driven by continuous improvement, innovation, and co-production.

A EU Framework for Social Services of Excellence for persons with disabilities

Rosita Scanferla, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, European Commission presented the ongoing work on the Framework for Social Services of Excellence, situating it within broader EU initiatives, such as the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) Principle 17, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and the Union of Equality.

Rosita explained that the framework aligns with the third priority area of the EU Disability Strategy and serves as one of two flagship initiatives, the other being Guidance on Independent Living (IL) and inclusion in the community. This was released just last week, and it is the first time a EU Commission representative speaks on it since its publication. She summarised its main aims. These twin initiatives highlight the interdependence of quality support services and independent living.

Key features of the framework include:

- **Five Thematic Building Blocks:**
 - Promoting suitable living arrangements and preventing institutionalization.
 - Shifting from institutional to person-centered approaches.
 - Enhancing community inclusion through accessibility, orientation, and combating stereotypes.



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- Promoting consultation and participation of persons with disabilities.
- Enabling transformation in service provision.
- **Voluntary Nature:** Building on the 2010 framework proposed by the Social Protection Committee (SPC) and the Commission.
- **Scope:** Covering both mainstream services (e.g., public employment services) and specialized services (e.g., rehabilitation).
- **Development Process:** Consultations with a Disability Platform subgroup comprising 14 Member States, 13 organizations, and the European Parliament. Meetings throughout 2024 and a positive SPC discussion in Budapest in September suggest strong support.

Rosita also presented a newly published **ESF+ Toolkit**, which provides guidance on leveraging EU funding for workforce development. It includes case studies and a checklist for good practices to train staff supporting independent living.

EPR Task force on Quality take aways discussion - good practice on delivering quality services to people with disabilities

Veronika Kaska, Deputy Director at Astangu Vocational Rehabilitation Centre (Estonia) and EPR board member, introduced to the work of the EPR Task Force on Quality which gathered 20 representatives of EPR member organisations and EQUASS experts in 10 European countries. The group discussed quality in services from a practitioner point of view, to see what does it actually mean to provide services of high quality, and collect suggestions to improve the quality framework for the person-centred approach pursued by EPR members. Findings informed advocacy at EU-level in the form of EPR feedback to the European Commission for the development of the Framework and the revision of EQUASS. The expert group identified many challenges, including the shift from institutional to personalised, community-based services or the need for an integrated organisation of services. Veronika highlighted the focus on rights, the importance of funding, quality of life of service users, and the EU to provide principles and examples for national quality frameworks. How do you engage service providers to go not just the minimum but the extra step and provide excellent services? Veronika concluded with sharing the principles that the Task Force proposed to include in a framework for social services of excellence: (1) Person-centred approach (2) Independent Living (3) Workforce and good governance and (4) Outcome oriented.

Anne Corr, Chief Operating Officer for SOS Kilkenny (Ireland), provided insights in the every-day management of her organisation, an independent local service provider which is dependent on state funding and, at the same time, bringing substantial economic value to the community. SOS Kilkenny offers housing for people with intellectual disability at scale and high quality, and is also employer for 350 care and support workers. Both help raising the value of the organisation for the community, and ensure a freedom to take good decisions for advancing service development, staff development and innovation. With regular funding not sufficient, rather building up a deficit in the organisation, Anne and colleagues are constantly trying to secure additional resources, and are successful for example with EU project funding. Showing the value for the community, and building reputation as a high quality service provider is key to this success. Reputation, however, does not help with shortcomings in funding systems, such as the absence of support specifically for disability and ageing. Many of the current service users are

above the age of 40; different and new support needs emerge but the state does not foresee respective funding. System gaps, moreover conflicting policies, and constantly having to take decisions what works best for the people involved, are the challenges for SOS Kilkenny. Against such challenges, leadership has an important role for maintaining quality, high standards and good reputation.

Veronika Kaska, elaborated further on the importance of leadership for the involvement of employees in improving the services. This starts with a clear mission, vision, goals, objectives, targets and outcomes for the organisation, well defined and implemented at all levels of the organisation. Ideally, they “trickle down to each and everybody’s worktable”, providing everyone with objectives and results. For Astangu, empowering the service user is a very important aspect, too. Many are not used to being asked what they want to do in their life and what they want to achieve. Then, quality services are about supporting their journey towards their dreams, about seeing service users as a subject, as a person with their own internal feelings. Meanwhile, the external working conditions for Astangu will change, which bears the question where do quality services go in the near future. Services are expected to become more complex because the social and working environment will be more complex. Here, digital tools, AI and their integration into the work will be crucial. Digital tools can help making services efficient and effective, allowing for tailored solutions for the services that each individual may need.

Susana Ortega Bataller, Fundación SASM (Spain), shared her organisation’s insights into the views of service users and the importance of autonomy and independence. Service users often find themselves in a situation of separation from their peers and burden for the community. Offering support means support with every day affairs and often all day. At times, the individual situation may ask for extensive assistance and care. Being taken care of then means little room for trying and experimenting with things in life, it may lead to fears, anxiety and stress not being able but also not learning to be with oneself or to deal with matters such as money. Susana presented the example of a service user with a lifelong history of struggle with her identity, emotions, anger, social life, relationships, her lifestyle and her place of living. This person requires close and professional support for a long period of time, frequent assisting with life-changing incidences such as drug abuse and pregnancies, ultimately leading to a young adult with severe mental health issues and the need for very advanced, long-term psychological care. The professionals offering this type of support have become extraordinarily expensive in Spain and thus unavailable for many. For this particular service user, SASM Foundation was lucky to find a specialised care facility suitable and willing to take the client.

Maria Melaniti, Quality Officer for Theotokos Foundation (Greece), presented a description of her role as quality and also data protection officer for a non-profit provider of holistic intervention and rehabilitation services to people with intellectual developmental disorders and disorders. The organisation care for 350 children, young adults and their families, also adults up to 35 years for social integration, supported employment with the aim of transition to the open labour market. Theotokos looks at 20 years of work on quality assurance, EQUASS certification and ISO 9001 certification. Taking aboard all departments and staff was a major challenge, requiring to establish a quality system that uses key performance indicators to evaluate the effectiveness of services and staff performance, as well as satisfaction surveys involving the service users and their parents, informing about trends, patterns and areas for improvement. The organisation integrates the findings in annual planning, also the qualitative and quantitative goals for the

year. Maria is also involved in new staff induction and training, as well as health and safety for service users and workers. Thereby, keeping records, thorough documentation and consistent monitoring are crucial tasks for a quality officer.

The EQUASS Experience for Continuous Improvement

Laura Jones, Consultant for EQUASS, acknowledged the importance of the work currently done towards the EU Framework on Social Services of Excellence for persons with disabilities. She also highlighted upcoming work taking place with EQUASS, the EPR owned framework for European quality in social services. EQUASS has offered a quality assurance framework for service providers since the 1990s, initially with a focus on vocational rehabilitation that was expanded to the larger social sector, supporting service providers in continuous improvement, learning and development. EQUASS is currently undergoing its third revision process, and there is an opportunity to both feed in and take inspiration between the works in progress. One key feature of EQUASS is indeed the specification for the social sector, another the invitation to go beyond a one-off audit and certification, rather enter a long-term process of continuous improvement. Organisations can choose between two levels of certification and work with a team of independent team of auditors in different countries. The audit process finds orientation in principles, criteria and indicators outlining five “stages” of quality, including the stages 4 or 5 reflecting excellence and thus also best practice in the sector or field of service provision. Here, using a quality assurance framework that is tailored to social services can help organisations advance considerably for example on the topic of participation of service users.

Attention is paid increasingly on user involvement and in particular their perspective on quality of life, for which EPR is currently developing an interesting assessment tool named QIAT for organisations to measure the impact of their services. For the continuous improvement of services, EQUASS aims to take on board Quality of Life as well as sustainability, transparency and risk management. The goal is to help organisations go beyond the mere obtaining a certificate or reaching minimum standards, rather aim at excellence across different aspects of excellence in services. In similar ways, it is hoped that work on excellence in services at European level will bring forward work on quality assurance, also bring along attention and financial incentives for supporting the efforts.

Towards a successful implementation of the Framework

Discussion with policy-makers and partners

The panel discussion aimed to explore the practical steps needed to implement the EU Framework for Social Services of Excellence, with contributions from policymakers, social partners, and service providers.

Haydn Hammersley Social Policy Coordinator, European Disability Forum (EDF) opened by recommending to use expectations of persons with disabilities as a benchmark for evaluating service quality. Services must be developed in continued consultation with persons with disabilities. Quality services should prioritise individual choice, flexibility, and personalisation. In cases of persons with more severe disabilities, he called for supported decision-making models, that can ensure that their preferences are respected. He also gave the example of personal budgets: while challenging due to long waiting lists

(as seen in Flanders), these provide users with a sense of ownership and control. Haydn also shared the concern that some individuals risk being conditioned to accept services not fit to their needs, due to limited awareness of their rights and possibilities. Therefore, he argued that services, no matter how high-quality, must be affordable and accessible, particularly in rural areas where options are often limited.

Sylvain Renouvel, Director, Federation of European Social Employers, highlighted the main workforce-related challenges in the social services sector:

- **Staff Retention and Training** → Improving wages, promoting lifelong learning, offering career progression, and ensuring work-life balance are essential. Services that operate 24/7 require additional support to prevent burnout.
- **Occupational Health and Safety** → A joint report with KU Leuven on improving working conditions will soon be published. Sylvain stressed the need for collaborative, bottom-up management approaches to motivate employees.
- **Social Dialogue** → He advocated for joint responsibility between employers and policymakers at national and EU levels to push for systemic improvements in workforce conditions, emphasizing that campaigns alone are insufficient.

Overall, Sylvain emphasised the economic importance of social services, noting that reducing service availability could result in labour force losses, negatively impacting GDP and the much sought-after European competitiveness.

Konstantina Leventi, Head of Policy, European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD) stated that a successful transition to person-centered services - in line with the UN CRPD - requires clear legal and policy frameworks. Such supportive ecosystem necessitates adequate funding and well-trained staff. In fact, as of present, restrictive funding models limit the capacity of social services to innovate and adapt. Thus, she called for piloting the European framework of Social Services of Excellence in Member States upon its release, and allocating dedicated budgets to ensure its uptake. Finally, she highlighted Spain's progress in abolishing guardianship and restoring legal capacity as a model for other European countries to follow.

Pablo Sanchez, EPR Board Member and Director of Alliances and Networks at Fundación INTRAS (Spain) provided insights into practical implementation of quality services, describing his organisation's work with 75 supervised flats in Spain. One key challenge is to ensure the sustainability of a service, while maintaining high quality, all considering budget constraints, audit costs, personnel salaries and investment in innovation. Thus effective management needs to make careful prioritisation. Then, Pablo highlighted EPR's role in fostering knowledge exchange and showcasing best practices amongst its members. For him, the upcoming framework is pointing to the vision where services must go, and he emphasised the need for strong leadership to steer organisations toward innovative service delivery models. The next step will be to ensure the uptake of the framework at regional and local level, so collaboration between social economy actors and respective national governments will be crucial.

Rosita Scanferla, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, European Commission acknowledged the challenges in convincing Member States (MS) to implement the framework, given the EU's limited competence in social services.



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- **EU Support Mechanisms:**
 - Raising awareness and fostering mutual learning through fora like the SPC and the Disability Platform.
 - Guiding investments by leveraging EU funding (e.g., ESF+, TSI) as a starting point for scaling up reforms with national funding.
- **Lessons from the 2010 Framework:** Its uneven uptake highlighted the need for greater national-level commitment and grassroots engagement.

Finally, Rosita highlighted ongoing analytical work on workforce dynamics and the inclusion of third-country nationals in the EU.

Q&A Session:

Michael Longuinho (Chance B) asked about linking ESF+ projects with national authorities.

- **Answer:** Rosita noted the importance of peer reviews managed by the SPC, emphasizing the need for co-production with both users and national stakeholders.

Furio Grammatica ((Fondazione Don Gnocchi)) raised concerns about disparities between EU-level guidance and national implementation.

- **Answers:** Panellists acknowledged diverse national models and stressed optimism due to recent positive developments, such as the Social Dialogue Committee. Pablo described the framework as an opportunity to align quality systems with the quality of life for service users.

Giada Venier (Fondazione Don Gnocchi) addressed the economic and financial sustainability of excellence in services.

- **Answers:** Long-term capacity building and sustainable funding models are crucial, beyond the scope of short-term projects. Konstantina called for dedicated budgets and piloting initiatives within MS to ensure effective framework implementation.

Timo Heiskala (Autism Foundation Finland) pointed out the risks of working in silos.

- **Answers:** Collaboration among organisations like EPR and EASPD is vital for sharing best practices and providing the European Commission with concrete examples. Haydn stressed the importance of continued consultation with persons with disabilities to ensure their voices guide the process.

The panel was concluded with the words from EPR Secretary-General thanking EPR members and EQUASS experts for their participation at the event and throughout the year via the taskforce on Quality. She highlighted EPR will keep working towards excellence in service provision to people with disabilities and looks forward to the publication of the European Commission's Framework and remains available to keep cooperating providing feedback from its members and from the EQUASS communities of experts.

Conclusions

Event participants were invited to do an interactive exercise. They were asked to reflect together in small groups on the key messages that they heard today. Then they could scan a MentiMeter link and write up one sentence to summarise this conversation. Here are the results of what was submitted and displayed on the screen:

- Implementation at national level

- Co production
- The framework is a good opportunity to increase the impact of services but ensuring sustainability is key
- Quality frameworks and systems must be developed with focus in generating impact in quality of life and with resources that guarantee national implementation and sustainability
- Co-production
- Raise awareness on quality, on impact assessment and on funding opportunities
- Take responsibility on actually implementing and changing the mindset of employees and management.
- No implementation without users
- Sustainability of transformations needs to be thought through from the beginning and the framework for social services of excellence will need a mechanisms to monitor it's effective implementation
- We have to find ways how the framework really can translate to outcomes for our organisation, individuals and authorities

These responses not only demonstrate engagement by the audience with the topic of quality services, but also a clear grasp of the main discussions held throughout the afternoon.

Evaluation

At the end of the event, participants were asked to fill in a short evaluation form to share their feedback. Many participants highlighted the event was an excellent opportunity to learn more about EU policies and the work of EPR. Out of 5, the event scored a 4,24