

Resilient Social Services

Building for the Future

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



This document is the Executive Summary of the briefing ‘Resilient Social Services: Building for the Future’ published as an output of the 2022 annual meeting of the European Social Network’s ‘Social Services Transformation and Resilience Working Group.’ Read the full [briefing](#) for an expanded social services resilience definition and approaches, a snapshot of current resilience-building capacities of social services in Europe and recommendations for future resilient social services.

Why do we need to talk about social services resilience?

As the world moves from crisis to crisis, resilience has become a focal point in the discussions on crisis response and recovery. Social services carry the responsibility to support those made vulnerable in times of crisis as well as their ongoing duty of care. However, after years of underinvestment, social services have been stripped considerably of the financial, human and infrastructure resources needed to provide continuing quality care. Nevertheless, amid ever-evolving environmental and political contexts, change will continue to happen all around us causing turbulence and uncertainty. For social services to rise to these and future challenges in a sustainable manner there is an urgent need to invest in resilience.

This investment will be most effective when based on a foundational understanding of resilience. The definition of resilience has been substantially explored in the disciplines of ecology, psychology, economics, public health, and many others. In recent times, the term has become popular in social policy and social services planning and strategies. However, despite this increased usage, there is still a need to clarify what resilience means in the social services context.¹

Defining resilience

In social services, resilience has been discussed mostly in terms of the emotional resilience and well-being of social workers.² This understanding, drawn from psychology, describes resilience as the process or outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences.³ However, to have a complete picture of resilience in social services, this ability to ‘bounce back’ should be understood beyond only the social services professional. In fact, resilience in social services exists on three distinct yet interrelated levels: people, communities, and systems.⁴

¹ 100% of respondents to the questionnaire as part of the ESN Social Services Transformation and Resilience Working Group stated they would like to learn more about what the concept of resilience means for social services.

² Rose, S. and Palattiyil, G., 2018. Surviving or thriving? Enhancing the emotional resilience of social workers in their organisational settings. *Journal of Social Work*, 20(1), pp.23-42.

³ American Psychological Association, 2022. Resilience. [online] [Dictionary.apa.org](https://dictionary.apa.org/resilience). Available at: <<https://dictionary.apa.org/resilience>> [Accessed 29 September 2022].

⁴ Ziglio, E., 2021. How can resilience as a concept help social services plan and deliver care continuity?.

People, communities, and systems

The 'people' level refers to ensuring the well-being of individuals involved in and with social services. Ensuring the well-being of the social or population groups that these individuals are a part of falls under the 'community' level. Finally, the 'system' level is the broadest of the three, encompassing all the structures that ensure the quality, accessibility, and continuity of services in times of crisis as well as in the face of global incremental changes.

Just like an ecosystem in nature, these levels are interdependent and therefore are the cause and consequence of each other's resilience. Resilience in social services, therefore, is about strengthening the capacity of people, communities and systems to cope with threats and adapt in response to them.⁵

What is capacity?

In the context of resilience, capacity refers to the ability of social services to respond to and manage crisis situations. Strengthening their capacity to do so will guarantee the continuity of social services and care, and hence their effectiveness. There are four distinct types of capacity that can be strengthened in people, communities and systems.⁶

Adaptive: capacity to accept and adapt to new situations

Absorptive: capacity to cope and develop reactive actions to respond to the new situation

Anticipatory: capacity to predict new situations and develop proactive actions in anticipation of the vulnerabilities

Transformative: capacity to transform and change to be suited for new situations that can make existing practices obsolete (this type relates mostly to systems)

Future resilient social services

From this understanding of resilience, the working group meeting was also an opportunity to reflect on what challenges remain for social services to become more resilient. The conclusions that came out of these discussions serve as recommendations for future work in the framework of the working group and policymakers. Focus areas include approaches to the design, management and evaluation of social services, enhancing the prestige of the social sector, how EU funds can be better tailored to and more easily managed by social services and addressing the social services workforce shortage across the EU.

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⁵ Ziglio, E., Azzopardi-Muscat, N. and Briguglio, L., 2017. Resilience and 21st century public health. *European Journal of Public Health*, 27(5), pp.789-790.

⁶ World Health Organization. Regional Office for Europe, 2017. Building resilience: a key pillar of Health 2020 and the Sustainable Development Goals: examples from the WHO Small Countries Initiative. World Health Organization. Regional Office for Europe.