

COVID – 19 FSWS CONTINGENCY PLANS

The **Foundation for Social Welfare Services (FSWS)** is a catalyst for change and development in the **social welfare** sector in **Malta**, consistent with the real and emerging needs of children, families and the community at large in order to avoid social exclusion. It is the main national service provider of social welfare services in Malta.

The Foundation is made up of the following Agencies and Directorates: Sedqa,, the National Agency against Drug and Alcohol Abuse and Compulsive Gambling, Agency for Community & Therapeutic Services (ACTS), Child Protection Directorate, Alternative Care Directorate, Appogg Agency, Gozo Branch Operations and there are a number of other directorates and departments operating from the Foundations' head office including: The Office of The Chief Executive Officer and its Secretariat; Corporate Services; Finance, Human Resources and Training, Marketing; and International Relations, Quality Assurance, Service Audits and Research.

As an island, Malta has unfortunately also been struck by COVID-19 and is at the forefront with proactive measures on multiple fronts to combat this challenge. In parallel, FSWS, with a workforce of 850 employees, is also taking a number of initiatives and measures so that whilst safeguarding its workforce, its services may continue seamlessly.

Through its agencies, directorates and departments, it has put in place measures and requested actions to protect both its service users and its employees through the preparation of guidelines and recommendations for its front line professionals and its administration too. The following are some practical examples:

- Where possible, FSWS is operating its services in distinct shifts where one group of workers within a particular shift is not in contact with another group of workers on other shifts. Thus, in the event that one group of workers has to go into quarantine, the other groups will still be available and operations are not halted.

With the measures that have been undertaken so far, FSWS is ensuring that it is still operating all of its services that do not place undue risk on all parties involved. Under the umbrella of services offered, there are a few that need to continue to operate as if one is under normal circumstances. Such services include, residential services for children and drug rehabilitation, the DETOX (Substance Misuse Outpatients Unit), domestic violence services together with risk assessments, Child Protection Services and Out of Hours' emergency services. Their continuation is essential and FSWS is committed to the provision of pertinent services for the benefit of its service users. Furthermore, FSWS is also providing crisis intervention services, phone intakes and other emergency services. Home visits have been temporarily postponed.

In some services especially those dealing with service users, telephone interventions are currently substituting scheduled/ongoing office visits. A drop-in roster has been maintained in order to attend to emergency cases, either via phone or on a face-to-face basis, depending on the presenting situation.

Agenzija Sedqa in particular, offer prevention programmes that operate in schools, workplaces and within the community. In this regard, preparation of material in relation to forthcoming sessions as well as alternative planning for the rescheduling of all suspended programmes and sessions is currently underway. Likewise, the same procedure is being adopted by other services to utilise time wisely during these exceptional circumstances.

In general, instructions have been clearly communicated to employees working with service users so that regular contact is kept with their clients through telephone interventions. Staff is aware that this is a difficult period for everyone, but especially for our service users who, in particular, run the risk of feeling socially isolated. Service users have been encouraged not to visit the centres unless really necessary and to ideally always call beforehand in order to schedule an appointment.

FSWS also operates a 24/7 National Helpline – 179 - which is manned by professionals who can advise about all issues related to the Foundation's remit and offer a sound guide to all those who are in need.

When it comes to its administration and other services within the Foundation that are not directly related to service users, the Foundation is acting in line with the directive issued by the Head of Civil Service and will continue following other similar instructions that may be issued. The directive lays down for teleworking requests by public sector employees to be accepted in their entirety, provided that the assigned work is carried out as requested. To this extent, shifts have been developed and essential meetings are being carried out via technology.

In this regard, the Foundation has applied the rule of a minimum daily physical presence of 25% of its employees during normal working hours. This is being done to ensure continuity of service. Hand sanitisers have been fixed across the buildings to be used by employees that are physically present in their offices.

In the meantime, FSWS is also abiding by the Government's Legal Notice on quarantine, which gives the **employee quarantine leave without loss of income** in cases where the employee is legally obliged to follow quarantine, that limits staff to a fixed zone or place as determined by health authorities.

Our Foundation is keeping continuous contact with our international counterparts both on a European level and further afield. We have submitted our contingency plans to our European counterparts at the European Social Network and also to the International Social Services for full cooperation on cross border issues.

Due to the COVID – 19, the Foundation for Social Welfare Services is constantly changing its practices, and tweaking where necessary to meet the needs of the service users, services, and employees at large, whilst staying safe for all.

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Recommendations on how ESN can help FSWS:

- ESN could be of help by extending deadlines or giving longer deadlines for submissions of questionnaires and compilation of feedback. This would be very helpful to not overstretch the staff with tight deadlines.
- ESN can support FSWS by providing more resources and opportunities such as online conferences and online meetings rather than face-to-face meetings/training so there is sharing of expertise whilst limiting travelling.
- ESN can support our Foundation in cross boarder issues by replying to emails and continue operating through the already set official channels.