

ESN Key Recommendations

Access to Quality Services

ESN Social Inclusion Programme

The **European Social Network** held a two-day seminar on access to quality services on 5-6 April 2006 in Barcelona. The event was organised by ESN in cooperation with the **Diputació de Barcelona** and was attended by 35 delegates from 14 European Union (EU) member states as well as over 300 from the province of Barcelona. It was the first in a series of seminars organised under the ESN work programme 2005-2007 as a key network funded under the EU Community Action Programme to Combat Social Exclusion.

These recommendations, drawn from the seminar, are intended to stimulate reflection among the key actors (European Commission, key networks, national governments, social services) in the EU Social Inclusion Process and ultimately to lead to action to improve access to quality services to the benefit of Europe's poor and excluded.

POLICY

A number of groups in society are at risk of exclusion because they may experience difficulties in accessing services: the following recommendations are intended as a recognition of this risk and as a call for action.

1. Services must be accessible to those with **physical, sensory or other communications difficulties**. It should be noted that provisions for people with forms of sensory deprivation (sight and hearing difficulties) were found to be significantly less developed than those for the physically disabled. Social services should also facilitate access for people with mental health problems.
2. Services must be equally accessible for people living in **urban and rural** areas. Services are often unevenly concentrated in urban areas, but provisions should also be made so that services are available to rural communities.
3. **Access to services must be integrated** so that users are able to take up a range of services (e.g. health, housing, employment) and transfer between services to meet their individual need.
4. Service providers should consider the **dignity and independence** of users in the way they offer services. Services can do so, for instance, by **empowering users** to manage their own care through personal budgets for care.
5. It is essential that information and communication about services be widely available and can be readily understood by potential users. These must be adapted to take account of **cultural and linguistic differences** among potential service users.
6. The role of **information and communications technologies (ICT)** in facilitating improvement to access to services on all above points should be given due attention.

GOVERNANCE

Several recommendations relating to the policy-making process, the management of services and especially to the preparation of the NAPs were also drawn from the seminar.

1. Every effort should be made to **involve service users** in the design and management of services and to provide them with opportunities for feedback. This will assist the move from a definition of need essentially based on the views of providers to one informed by the wishes and needs of users.
2. Local and regional authorities are major providers of social services across the European Union. Given their proximity to service users and citizens, the European Commission and national governments should act to **strengthen the involvement of social services** in the preparation of National Action Plans.
3. National and regional associations of elected representatives and directors of **social services should be proactive** in participating in the preparation of the NAPs and making the EU Social Inclusion Process better known.
4. European and national policy-makers are urged to **consider the development of indicators** and targets to measure access to services. It was considered that these would be of particular benefit in the following areas: physical and sensory accessibility, level of participation by minority ethnic groups and access to multiple services through single/integrated systems.

Directors of Social Services across the European Union, drawing on their experience and expertise, call on national governments to address the issue of access to quality services in the third National Action Plans on Social Inclusion 2006-2008 and to draw on the specific recommendations made above.



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