



european social network
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Child Poverty and Welfare in Europe

the Message from Social Services



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The European Social Network (ESN) is the independent network for social services in Europe.

Social services have a particular responsibility for safeguarding children and young people which is legally established in many countries. Beyond this, their work impacts on children's lives in many ways – through support to children, parents, carers and the wider community from infancy, through education and into adulthood. This role gives social services professionals a valuable insight into the lives of children, particularly vulnerable children.

ESN brought together representatives of social services and the social care sector from seventeen European countries for a seminar in Copenhagen on 15-16 March 2007. This seminar and previous ESN work on children's issues shape this statement.



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VALUES OF SOCIAL WORK WITH CHILDREN

Values and principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work with children. With a unique and demanding role, social care professionals' work is underpinned by these values and principles.

- Social services are above all concerned to put the best interests of the child before other considerations and to strive to provide care and support which is timely, effective and supportive.
- Social services believe that all children and young people, their parents and carers must be treated with respect and dignity. We are committed to ensuring equal opportunities for every child whatever his/her life situation and irrespective of ethnic origin, faith or disability.
- Being aware that we intervene in people's lives at the most difficult times, social services are committed to informing the child and parent or carer fully of their situation, the decision-making processes affecting them and what care and support is available to them.
- Social services are committed to consulting the child and their parent or carer in the most appropriate way, listening to and reflecting their views in care decisions. We also support them in the difficult personal and care decisions they make for themselves.
- Social services support the principles and contribute to the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child¹.

ESN is committed to support the participation of social services and service users in European and national policy-making on this basis and believes that this will contribute to better services for children and young people in need.

¹ Web Reference: <http://www.unicef.org/crc/>



HOW SOCIAL SERVICES CARE FOR AND SUPPORT VULNERABLE CHILDREN

Social services play a vital but often unseen role working for children's welfare and wellbeing and empowering them and their families and carers to overcome poverty and marginalisation.

- Social services provide care and protection to the most vulnerable and marginalised children in society. They most often work with children in care or leaving care, with victims of abuse, with those who are 'hardest to place' and increasingly unaccompanied children seeking asylum².
- Social services employ early intervention and prevention methods with parents-to-be and with families whose lives are complicated by drug abuse, alcoholism or indebtedness. There are services which help to divert from criminal activity, provide alternative housing and care.
- Social services work across public agencies and service providers (health, schools, police, psychosocial support) to ensure that children with potential problems are identified early and get the full range of support they need.
- Social services manage fostering and adoption services, residential and day care, sheltered accommodation and provide associated support services for vulnerable children and parents, including victims of abuse and children whose parents have an alcohol problem.
- Social services work with children with disabilities and learning difficulties to improve their life chances. They make assessments of need and arrange the provision of specialist support in the home or in school. They support their parents and carers through psychosocial advice and respite care.
- Social services work with other local and regional authorities, e.g. economic development and investment bodies, to highlight problems in pockets of deprivation and promote social inclusion in local development and investment plans.
- Social services learn from each other locally, nationally and across Europe. Professional development, peer review, best practice development and exchange, service assessment and inspections are vital to the continuing improvement of social services.

² ESN led a European project on the situation of unaccompanied children seeking asylum and issued a statement which is available here: <http://www.socialeurope.com/asylum/>



ADDRESSING CHILD POVERTY IN THE EU POLICY FRAMEWORK

Social services have a strong practice perspective built upon their values, their expertise and experience of working with children at the margins of society.

Given current European and national policy perspectives, social services call on the European Commission, the Social Protection Committee, national governments and key stakeholders, to consider the following:

- Child poverty needs to be seen as a multidimensional phenomenon, of which household income poverty is but one element. Poverty of opportunity and aspiration and social factors such as substance abuse in parents or lack of community and cultural life also play an important role.
- This phenomenon requires a dynamic and multidimensional response comprising access to quality services (social, health, housing, education, transport) which work together in the interests of the child, full participation in leisure, cultural and civic life, support to parents including rehabilitation as a preparation for work and adequate income support.
- The National Action Plans on Social Inclusion provide a useful policy development and monitoring tool. They tend to be aspirational and need to be accompanied by policy action backed up appropriate investment in delivery authorities to improve the lives of children. The broad role of local and regional social services in delivering policy and developing good practice has to be fully recognised in national policy-making.
- Policy-makers and government departments themselves need to work more together effectively in the best interests of children.
- Family income is crucial in addressing child poverty. Policy-makers should recognise that the *active inclusion* agenda has potential to support this, particularly in communities where 'worklessness' (i.e. where generation after generation of a family has not worked) is prevalent.
- Policy-makers should recognise that social services for children need to be well resourced and be able to recruit highly trained professionals and support workers in order to accomplish their mission to care for vulnerable children and promote opportunity for all.
- There is a need to support research and good practice development to help services promote the effective participation of vulnerable and damaged children in the decision-making processes that affect their lives.



- Social services need to be involved in the development of the European Commission's Child Rights agenda and there needs to be effective joint working between Commission departments with responsibility for children's issues.
- There is a need for Europe-wide data and analysis so as to better understand the effectiveness of different approaches to care and protection of looked-after children including in new Member States, as they move from institutional to other forms of placement and care (adoption, fostering, day-care centres, sheltered accommodation).

The European Social Network is committed to supporting social services to make a practice-led contribution to EU and national policy-making for children and young people specifically and in other key areas.

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info@esn-eu.org / www.esn-eu.org