**Quality in social services:
The perspective of social services working with homeless people**

FEANTSA

FEANTSA is the European federation of national organisations working with homeless people. The more than 100 members of FEANTSA come from 30 European countries and are non-governmental organisations which provide a wide range of services to homeless people including accommodation, social, health and employment support. FEANTSA is the only major European network that focuses on homelessness.

When referring to social services, the European Commission refers to two broad types: social security schemes and personal social services. The second type is sub-divided into four main categories: crisis and emergency services, rehabilitation services, long-term care services and social housing.[1]

In developing pathways out of homelessness, FEANTSA organisations represent services which provide a mix of emergency, resettlement and long-term support services. However, social services working with homeless people are still predominantly services providing emergency accommodation (shelters, hostels, temporary accommodation) and emergency advice (non-residential day centres, outreach services) which try to find adequate and integrated solutions to prevent people from entering a chronic cycle of homelessness. [2]

FEANTSA therefore feels concerned by current EU debates on social services and wishes to draw attention to key elements to consider when discussing quality in homeless services:

- The **specificities** of homeless services ;
- The **dimensions of quality** which are relevant for homeless services ;
- The **development and implementation** of quality in homeless services ;
- The **role of the EU** in quality debates.

Specificities of homeless services

The social service sector is a complex sector and far from homogenous. The nature and objectives of social services differ (see Commission definition). Homeless services are often the first crucial step in the inclusion process - a first link with society for people who have lived in extreme poverty and exclusion. They can also be the last stop before the street for people who have been evicted, who have escaped their violent home, or who do not have the capacity to live independently. This section highlights some specificities of homeless services which should be taken into account when discussing and developing quality guarantee and measurement tools.

Transitional - The primary function of homeless services is to provide a temporary solution for people with emergency needs. The aim is to move people on to appropriate solutions as fast as possible. Homeless services are therefore transitional in nature and do not encourage service users to stay on in the service (quite different to, for instance, long-term care services). Unfortunately, this transitional function is evolving rapidly in some countries towards a permanent function when no move-on accommodation or solutions are available.

Diverse - The profiles of people using shelters and hostels vary significantly. People may require accommodation, legal advice, debt advice, health and social support, labour market training, or a combination of all these services. Homeless services therefore require flexibility to address these wide-ranging (and sometimes complex) needs adequately and move people on to appropriate services. These needs also may change rapidly over time (with new profiles of homelessness emerging) so that flexibility to find creative solutions is crucial. Flexibility is also required in homeless services for addressing the needs of people with complex behavioural problems– low-threshold services are crucial to ensure everyone has access to adequate support. Any quality management system would therefore have to preserve this diversity and avoid creating rigid service structures which prevent homeless services from addressing the multiple needs of people experiencing homelessness in the most effective way.

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[1] Communication of the Commission on Social Services of General Interest (SSGI) (COM2006 177 final, 26 April 2006)
[2] See ETHOS typology of homelessness and housing exclusion in Annex

Service users - As indicated above, the profiles of homeless service users vary greatly. However, what they do tend to have in common is a lack of financial resources. Users of social services in the disability sector or the older people's sector are sometimes perceived as consumers who have a budget to spend. Homeless people are often perceived as "users" of services rather than "consumers" of services in the traditional sense since they have very little or no financial resources. In addition, users of homeless services tend to be in a vulnerable position, especially when faced with physical/mental health problems, lack of self-confidence, lack of legal status and other such difficulties which create barriers to accessing fundamental rights.

Non-market - Some social services are perceived as a potential "market" (such as, for instance, the long-term care sector for older people or disabled people). Our understanding is that the homeless service sector in most EU countries is very much a non-market (with few competing organisations) and that the services are generally provided on a not-for-profit basis.

Context - The conditions that homeless services work in are sometimes difficult, mainly due to the lack of a legal framework, the lack of political acknowledgement of the existence of homelessness and, consequently, the lack of funding. The vulnerable position of homeless people in society means their voice is not always heard and is less influential than other parts of the population. Other social issues which are better recognised and more consensual (long-term care for older people, childcare, disability) work in a different context to homeless services.

Dimensions of quality relevant for homeless services

Homeless services, like most social services, are not static in nature but subject to ongoing development in accordance with emerging needs. The concept of quality in homeless services will therefore be subject to ongoing change as well and will be dependent on the location and context of the homeless service.[3] With the Donabedian conceptual model of quality as a starting point (relating to structural aspects, processes, and outcomes), the following dimensions of quality in homeless services can be derived:

Table 1_ Operationalisation of the three differing aspects of Donabedian's conceptual model

Structural aspects	The Process of care	The Outcome of Services
Physical properties of buildings	Working alliance	Overall Quality of Life
Safety	Cultural competence	Quality of Life domains
Staffing levels	Privacy and Confidentiality	User or client satisfaction
Staffing Qualifications	Rights	Housing status
Access to services	Safety	Social / Employment Status
Financial resources	User involvement in planning	Mental health status
Service Objectives	User involvement in evaluation	

Extract from J. Wolf and W. Edgar (2007), « Measuring quality of services and provision in homelessness », European Journal of Homelessness, vol 1

Structural aspects - These relate to the stable characteristics of the service, including the human, physical, legal and financial resources necessary for delivering services to homeless people. These would also include dimensions such as inter-agency cooperation, strategic planning and internal governance, the composition and skills of the workforce, and the physical state of the accommodation. These aspects are key for delivering quality.

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[3] European Journal of Homelessness, vol.1 : Quality and Standards in Homelessness Service and Housing for Marginal Groups

Process of care – The process of care or support is often considered as the primary object of quality assessment. This was operationalised in the table above to include dimensions such as working alliances with other organisations, user involvement and participation, the cultural competence of staff to respond to the needs of the service user, the safe environment of the service, the respect of the service user's rights (including privacy, confidentiality).

Outcomes - These relate to the tangible results of the actions taken by the services and are linked to changes in the service user's living situation and general improved quality of life. Outcomes are also measured in terms of the service's capacity to create effective links with other sectors of society (since the ultimate aim is to trigger an inclusion process and prevent a cycle of homelessness).

Processes on these different levels are extremely interdependent. Even if the quality assessment focuses on one element (like the process of care), there should always be an effort to collect contextual data since this will influence performance of the service.

Development and implementation of quality in homeless services

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The notion of quality can be a useful way of introducing a new philosophy or new ethics into social services, encouraging and supporting social services to be adaptable to emerging societal trends and to new needs of service users. To this end, homeless services in many EU countries have developed (or are developing) internal quality management systems which support the improvement of services *by the services themselves*. The push for quality can come from within the homeless sector or it can come from public authorities (local, regional, national). If the driver of quality is external to the homeless service sector, some key principles should be considered when implementing quality, as outlined below.

Pre-conditions - Any quality demands should be accompanied by an adequate legal framework and sufficient funding to ensure full and systematic implementation of quality standards. Despite sometimes difficult conditions, homeless services manage to be creative and innovative, finding a range of solutions for people with complex needs. However, the introduction of quality management systems in homeless services would require more favourable conditions in order to guarantee quality is achieved.

Specificities - Quality measurement should clearly be linked to the nature and objectives of the service. Inspecting authorities should therefore have a full understanding of the nature and the context in which the service works (see above).

Support - There needs to be a structural component to a quality framework that requires legislative/government support to organisations so that they can meet the quality standards agreed. It is useful for statutory or expert bodies to provide support to services in terms of expert advice, guidance and human resourcing on implementing quality standards. Such support initiatives could also include systems for services to share best practice pre and post evaluation.

Attitude - The attitude in implementing quality standards is crucial. Any external inspections should be aimed to support the improvement of services rather than to act as control-based inspections. For this reason, it is crucial for any quality principles and criteria to be developed in cooperation with the services concerned and the users of these services to ensure ownership and trust.

User participation - Consultation of service users is especially important when clarifying and defining rights and responsibilities. It is important to note that this is not always easy to put into practice, especially in temporary hostels where the service user is in a situation of distress and stays for only short periods before moving on to other forms of accommodation. User participation should therefore be central in the design and development of the service, allowing for time and space for consultation of services users (for instance day consultations for users of nightshelters, etc)

User rights and responsibilities - The rights of service users have to be implemented in a way that allows for a balance between the interests of the service user and the interests of the community. For instance, the homeless service cannot always tolerate anti-social behaviour (which can be due to alcohol/substance abuse of the user), if they have to create a safe environment for other service users and staff. Clarity is needed on rights and responsibilities when implementing quality.

Transparency - It is important to ensure transparency regarding *who* is responsible for quality inspection, regarding *when* and *how* the quality inspection is to be carried out, regarding the reporting procedures, regarding the availability of complaint mechanisms, preferably through an open online process and clear guidelines available to all services on implementation methods used.

Responsibilities - The roles of bodies involved in quality implementation should be clarified. The quality inspecting authority should be independent of the financial allocation of the services. This authority should be aware of the specificities of homeless services and take them into consideration during the implementation.

Scaling - New quality systems inevitably place pressure on homeless services to adapt their working methods and service structure. In order to allow services (especially smaller services) to adapt to new quality requirements without any threat of closure or funding cuts, quality standards should be introduced progressively in stages i.e. through a scale of priority and non-priority quality standards and with a realistic time-scale. This scaling approach can also work the other way when setting up new services in difficult areas (rural, isolated) which cannot fully meet quality requirements, at first, due to lack of infrastructure or scarce professional staff.

Review - Homeless services, like most social services, permanently evolve as society evolves and new needs emerge. It is fundamental to acknowledge that development of standards and criteria for measuring quality in services is not a static process but a dynamic and ongoing process which requires regular review.

EU role in quality debates

The European Union has always been active in the area of services, aiming to create an open European market of services with no borders. Recently, *social* services of general interest (SSGI) have also been discussed, mainly in relation to the impact of EU legislation (internal market and competition rules) on these services and also in the framework of EU social policy debates (social protection, social inclusion, active inclusion). These debates are increasingly focusing on approaches to guarantee **quality** in these services. Quality standards in SSGIs should be developed through a bottom-up approach very much linked to the local context. Nevertheless, the EU could have a capacity-building role in quality debates, by facilitating exchanges and developing toolkits to support the development of quality management at local level.

Transnational exchanges

In the framework of the EU social protection and social inclusion strategy which aims to coordinate national social inclusion policies (through the Open Method of Coordination – OMC), the European Commission has facilitated exchanges between national governments on different social issues, including homelessness. In order to do this, it is necessary to develop a common language or common definitions to enable comparisons of national initiatives and policies. In developing transnational exchanges on quality in social services, it appears that some countries are keen to develop an EU quality framework providing guidelines on the methodology to set, monitor, and evaluate quality standards. This would be a non-binding and voluntary framework which could guide national and local organisations (services, public authorities, service users) when looking beyond their country borders. This can be useful and has been done in other social areas as well. The initiatives mentioned below will surely be a useful testing ground for the development of this European framework. It should be clearly noted however that such a framework would represent a European compromise which could only partially reflect the complexities of the social service sector and the local realities.

PROGRESS Research and Projects

Under the PROGRESS funding programme, the European Commission is funding transnational research and projects on quality in social services. At the beginning of 2009, eight transnational projects were launched to test and develop quality assessment tools. In addition, a European study will be commissioned to take stock of quality measurement in social services across Europe. Such European initiatives are not invasive and are potentially useful to strengthen the capacity of services and authorities to introduce quality. The Prometheus project, for instance, is testing the European quality framework EQUASS (currently used to develop quality in the disability sector) in other social services like homeless services, child welfare services, and long-term care services. PROGRESS is also a useful source of funding of European networks of social services. These networks can provide useful feedback to the Commission on the nature of their sector and local realities. They can also be useful channels for transnational exchanges and dissemination of quality measurement tools developed in other countries.

CEN – European standardisation committee

The Prometheus project has involved CEN in discussions on European principles for developing quality in social services. CEN develops standards in different EU policy areas through a consensus-based approach. In February 2009, CEN launched a « workshop agreement » procedure to develop European principles for developing quality in social services – these principles would be non-binding and voluntary in nature and would serve as a reference tool. The method used allows all relevant stakeholders to take part in the workshop and the principles would be agreed by consensus. The adopted framework would then be sent to all national standardisation committees for reference. It will be interesting to see if the workshop stakeholders can reach agreement on common principles for all social services – it is crucial in this respect to take the time necessary to reach consensus. It is clear that the CEN workshop will not develop « standards » for measuring quality, but rather « principles » for strengthening quality in social services. These will have to be non-prescriptive principles which serve as a common language for transnational exchanges, and which can be adapted and operationalised in different social service sectors, should national and local actors choose to make use of such a common framework.

Annex: ETHOS – European Typology of Homelessness and housing exclusion

		Operational Category		Living Situation		Generic Definition
Conceptual Category	**ROOFLESS**	1	People Living Rough	1.1	Public space or external space	Living in the streets or public spaces, without a shelter that can be defined as living quarters
		2	People in emergency accommodation	2.1	Night shelter	People with no usual place of residence who make use of overnight shelter, low threshold shelter
	HOUSELESS	3	People in accommodation for the homeless	3.1	Homeless hostel	Where the period of stay is intended to be short term
				3.2	Temporary Accommodation	
				3.3	Transitional supported accommodation	
		4	People in Women's Shelter	4.1	Women's shelter accommodation	Women accommodated due to experience of domestic violence and where the period of stay is intended to be short term
		5	People in accommodation for immigrants	5.1	Temporary accommodation / reception centres	Immigrants in reception or short term accommodation due to their immigrant status
				5.2	Migrant workers accommodation	
		6	People due to be released from institutions	6.1	Penal institutions	No housing available prior to release
				6.2	Medical institutions (*)	Stay longer than needed due to lack of housing
				6.3	Children's institutions / homes	No housing identified (e.g by 18th birthday)
		7	People receiving longer-term support (due to homelessness)	7.1	Residential care for older homeless people	Long stay accommodation with care for formerly homeless people (normally more than one year)
				7.2	Supported accommodation for formerly homeless people	
	INSECURE	8	People living in insecure accommodation	8.1	Temporarily with family/friends	Living in conventional housing but not the usual or place of residence due to lack of housing
				8.2	No legal (sub)tenancy	Occupation of dwelling with no legal tenancy illegal occupation of a dwelling
				8.3	Illegal occupation of land	Occupation of land with no legal rights
		9	People living under threat of eviction	9.1	Legal orders enforced (rented)	Where orders for eviction are operative
				9.2	Re-possession orders (owned)	Where mortagee has legal order to re-possess
		10	People living under threat of violence	10.1	Police recorded incidents	Where police action is taken to ensure place of safety for victims of domestic violence
	INADEQUATE	11	People living in temporary / non-conventional structures	11.1	Mobile homes	Not intended as place of usual residence
				11.2	Non-conventional building	Makeshift shelter, shack or shanty
				11.3	Temporary structure	Semi-permanent structure hut or cabin
		12	People living in unfit housing	12.1	Occupied dwellings unfit for habitation	Defined as unfit for habitation by national legislation or building regulations
		13	People living in extreme overcrowding	13.1	Highest national norm of overcrowding	Defined as exceeding national density standard for floor-space or useable rooms

Note: Short stay is defined as normally less than one year; Long stay is defined as more than one year.
This definition is compatible with Census definitions as recommended by the UNECE/EUROSTAT report (2006)

(*) Includes drug rehabilitation institutions, psychiatric hospitals etc.

FEANTSA is supported by
the European Community Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity (2007-2013),
PROGRESS

This programme was established to financially support the implementation of the objectives of the European Union in the employment and social affairs area, as set out in the Social Agenda, and thereby contribute to the achievement of the Lisbon Strategy goals in these fields.

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FEANTSA is supported financially by the European Commission. The views expressed herein are those of the authors and the Commission is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained herein.