

EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF SERVICE PROVIDERS FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES



Staff Matters:

from care worker to enabler of change

EASPD Conference Report 2019

This report was written by Thomas Bignal, EASPD Policy Advisor, as a result of the discussion had at EASPD's and KVPS's European Conference; 'Staff Matters: Disability workforce of tomorrow' hosted on 3rd-4th October 2019 in Helsinki Finland.

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“From care worker to enabler of change”

Introduction

The purpose of social services is to help create the conditions that enables everyone to function as a full member of society and to advance their human and fundamental rights. This evolving role for social service providers is highlighted by a growing number of international agreements such as the [UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#), as well as the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) and the [Sustainable Development Goals](#). Social service provision is also noted to be crucial in achieving an [“Economy of Well-being”](#), now agreed upon and promoted by the Council of the European Union.

The single most important element in social service provision is staff, which represents by far the biggest expenditure for most, if not all, service providers across Europe. This is not surprising given the face-to-face nature and personal dimension of the professions involved in care and support, which -in the simplest of terms- can be reduced to individuals helping other individuals with support needs, to have positive and active lives in their communities, as full citizens

Social service provision is also one of Europe’s [biggest job creators](#) with over 10.9 million professionals across the European Union and with over 2 million new jobs created in the

last decade alone. This means that millions of people across Europe should now be working -or aiming to work- as human rights enablers, dedicating their professional lives to helping others to live fulfilled and empowered lives. In the right context, there are very few professions more important, meaningful and diversified than in social service provision.

Equally true is the [many challenges](#) facing professionals in social care and support; be it a lack of recognition of their impact, frequent underfunding of services resulting in poor salaries and unattractive working conditions, insufficient training opportunities, inadequate career paths and an overly strong focus on management and bureaucracy. In addition, in many services, the crucial enabling role of the support worker has still to replace the out-dated idea of 'caring' under a medical model of care. For Service Providers, this has led to significant [staff shortages and difficulties linked to recruitment and retention](#), in particular of qualified staff. The detrimental impact all this has on the transition to person-centred and community-based forms of care and support (rather than institutional), in line with the UN CRPD and the European Pillar of Social Rights, cannot be underestimated.

In this context, there is no doubt that "[Staff Matters! Disability Workforce of Tomorrow](#)" was the perfect topic for the Conference organised by the European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD) and the Service Foundation for People with an Intellectual Disability (KVPS), supported by the Finnish Presidency of the Council of the European Union. The following report aims to cover the discussions and topics highlighted during the Conference and proposes 5 key action points that policy makers and social service providers must consider to ensure that Staff Matters! And to help transform the millions of staff into millions of human rights enablers.



Work in Social Care and Support is Important and Meaningful

By empowering all persons in society to live full and active lives, there are few jobs [more important and meaningful as in social care and support](#). The multi-faceted impact of professionals in social care and support also too often goes un-recognised. Whilst most people understand the social impact social care and support has for vulnerable persons, too few people see the [broader effect](#) both on the economy and on the quality of life of all. For instance, social support [can help persons who are excluded from the labour market](#) (and therefore relying on social benefits) to get access to jobs; thus boosting the economy, as well as making the most of taxpayers' money. Similarly, getting access to affordable social care is crucial to giving more breathing space and options for informal carers – often women; thus improving their [quality of life, work-life balance and employment and career prospects](#).

Yet too often work in social care and support is seen in a negative light; generally because attention is paid to these professions only when there is a scandal, a crisis, or when it is conceptualised as a safety net to prevent social discomfort. Whilst work in social care and support is not always easy or well-paid, it is equally important to highlight that millions of professionals in social services, working both front-line or in more administrative jobs, take great pleasure and meaning in their

work; often seeing it as more than just a “job” since the impact on people’s lives or social conditions is tangible. [At a time when people are seeking more meaningfulness in their life and career](#), social care and support can offer many opportunities to people across the continent, as well as high degrees of job satisfaction.

Whereas external factors (appropriate funding, adequate legal frameworks, balanced user-professional ratios, etc) are essential, social care and support providers also have to do more for social care and support work to be seen in a positive light. Additional efforts should be aimed to highlight the work opportunities in the social sector for people of all ages but especially, in schools and higher/further education institutions, by public employment agencies or the media. Social service providers also need to improve their communication about the effectiveness and impact of work in social care and support and the meaningfulness it can bring to people and in society as a whole. In short, we need to ensure that social care and support becomes the number one attractive prospect for anyone seeking more meaningful professions.

Work in Social Care and Support is Done by People for People

One way of attracting and retaining more workers in social care and support is to maximise the face-to-face or human contact and personal nature between the care and support staff and the service users. The increasing over-reliance on bureaucratic procedures for the sake of improved impact reporting is having a counterproductive effect on care and support whereas professionals are spending less time actually providing face-to-face support to the service users and more time on administrative tasks. Whilst it is important to ensure a good service is provided, the trend to focus more on more on reporting and administrative duties, as well as protocol compliance and due procedure is generally seen as both costly and ineffective. It also hinders the attractiveness of the sector.

This is why more and more care and support providers are challenging the administrative and managerial approach to service provision. New models, such as by [Buurtzorg](#) in the Netherlands or [Enable Scotland](#), focus on ensuring that decisions are taken as close as possible to service users and by placing more trust and responsibility to those closest to them; in other words, front-line care and support workers rather than service management. These new models aim to separate the care activities from the administrative and back office processes; which allow well-trained care professionals and administrative professionals

to do what they both respectively do best. This allows to maximise the time care and support workers spend with their users or other stakeholders, rather than in "filling in forms".

Of course, for this approach to be possible, it is necessary to create the right environment for this to be feasible. Trend-setting methodologies such as [co-production](#) must be promoted. All professionals must be continuously trained to ensure they are aware of the new trends and perspectives in their respective lines of work. It is not just about methodologies and training, it is also sometimes about attitudes and values. Social service providers must



work towards creating the right atmosphere that can boost empathy between staff and users, rather than the contrary. In this regard, more attention should be given to situations of pre-burnout and burnout. Policy makers and public authorities must also be aware that these elements are difficult to measure, yet they are equally crucial to quality, effective and efficient social service provision.

Technology can and will play an important role in the future of care and support in Europe. Its success, however, will rely on its ability to strengthen the personal dimension of care and support services, rather than any effort to replace it. This was highlighted by the new President of the European Commission Ms von der Leyen who argued for the need to “*automate work that is wearisome for us*

humans: carrying heavy loads, performing repetitive tasks in factories or in offices. And this will give us time. Time for what distinguishes human beings. Time for what computers can't do: empathy and creativity. A care robot can help lift patients and make beds and digitalisation can help with administrative tasks. This will allow nursing staff to have time to do what is really important: to talk with their patients, to be there for them.

There is a need for significantly more research and data collection to ensure that we find the right solutions to these challenges.



Work in Social Care and Support is about Local Communities and Welcomes very Diverse Skills, Profiles & Perspectives

The evolving trend towards community-based and inclusive forms of social service provision is also having a major impact on the types and diversity of professions and skillsets required.

Working in social care and support can no longer be seen simply 'caring for someone', in the traditional understanding of the profession, ie; meaning providing care for persons with support needs, usually in institutional settings. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has called for a total transformation of that approach. The Convention requires the development of communities which positively include people with disabilities rather than deliberately or unthinkingly exclude them. It calls for person with disabilities to be enabled to take control of their own lives to the greatest extent possible. Consequently, now, [social care and support work is increasingly about co-operation with local communities and engaging more and more with local stakeholders \(users, families, local authorities, housing providers, businesses, schools, other care providers, etc\).](#) As a result, there is a strong need for an up-

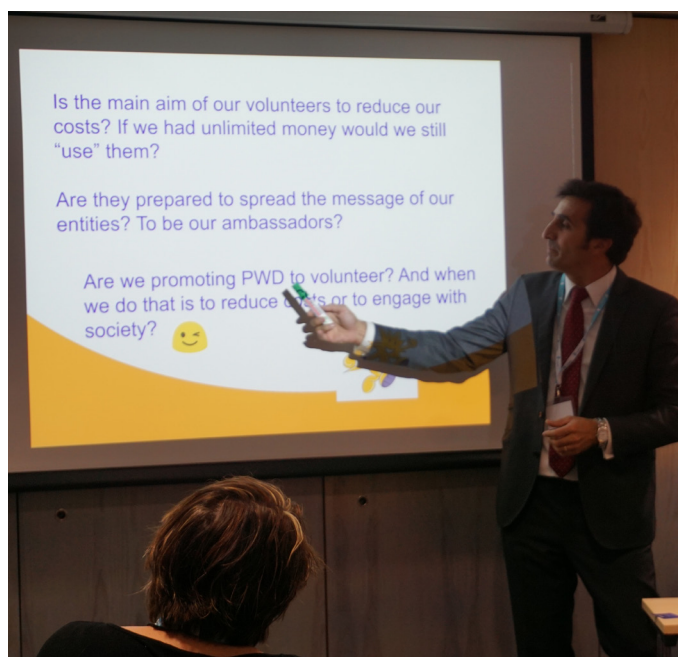
skilled workforce with a more diverse skill-set and who have a better understanding of these new needs and insight into the changing modus operandi of all these various stakeholders. It also means providing the services in different settings and circumstances; for instance, more in more in people's own homes, in businesses or in schools.



Last but not least, [the growing use of technology in social care and support will also impact the way social care and support](#) is provided and therefore also impact on the day-to-day work of social care and support professionals. To respond effectively to these policy and practice developments, a pro-active approach – focused on adequate training in social care education and continuous professional development- is required to ensure that all professionals in social care – new and experienced alike- are able to provide such services in the right environment.

Job profiles in social services are also becoming increasingly diverse, with the need for more professionals with a background in law, sociology, technology and computer science, marketing, communication, business or in administration. Social care and support now needs to attract and retain staff with an increasingly diverse background.

This is of course a positive; offering many opportunities to people, who are trained in fields which are not traditionally linked to social care provision, to find meaningful and productive work in social care and support. It also requires a shift in thinking by providers, authorities and other stakeholders alike to adapt to this new reality and find ways to



attract such diverse professionals into social care and support.

Whilst improving, there continues to be major diversity challenges in social care and support, primarily regarding very significant gender imbalances, with the norm -across Europe- being that front-line staff are 80% female, whilst many managers are male. This can partly be explained by gender stereotypes as well as ingrained structural issues from society as a whole, as well as within social care and support. This is not only wrong in absolute moral terms, it also has significant strategic and practical negative impacts on recruitment and retention in the sector and on the image of the workforce as a whole. With staff shortages common and growing in social care and support, it is important to attract more men into the sector. The sector can no longer afford to be conceptualised and seen (with all the financial and social consequences such an attitude brings) as 'women's work.' Similarly, a failure to have more women in managerial positions in social care and support is also a failure to attract talent into these management positions. The same can be said regarding attracting more men in front-line jobs. On general note, particular effort must be made to recruit and retain a more diverse workforce including -for instance- persons with disabilities, as well as to recognise and support care and support professionals with a migrant background, which make up an increasing proportion of professionals in our field.

Broadly speaking, work in social care and support can provide more and more professional opportunities to people with [diverse skills, profiles, perspectives and backgrounds](#). However, public policies, procedures and standards must be adapted to ensure the social care and support sector makes the most of these developments.

Work in Social Care and Support Requires Resources and Investment

Workforce recruitment, retention and development makes for the biggest expenditure of most, if not all, providers in Europe. As a consequence, [boosting public funding](#) is a crucial element of any discussion around staff issues, in particular on the above action points.

For the last decade, cuts to public funding in social care and support have had a very negative impact on the workforce in social care and support; leading to many people to talk about "care crisis" or a "war for talent". This also contributes to the "brain drain" of qualified staff from countries with lower GDPs towards those with GDPs, thus hindering the development of care & support services in the former countries. At first sight, there would seem to be no problem with job



creation in social services continuing to grow significantly - with 2 million extra jobs being created in ten years. However, in reality, it has been a case of recruiting more people, but with less funding; which -over time- has reduced the attractiveness of the sector as a career and as a place to work, put greater burdens on the professionals and hindered the development of innovative methods in workforce development, as referred to above.

[Staff shortages have become the norm](#) and, simply put, without staff, there is no care and support provision. At a time when demand for such services is increasing - and will



continue to increase in the foreseeable future – improving recruitment and retention in social service provision must become the number one priority for policy-makers, providers and users alike.

The single biggest solution to staff shortages in social care and support is [to ensure that the sector is adequately resourced by public funding](#), as well as implemented through the right funding models which place workforce development and the implementation of the UN CRPD at their heart of their social investment strategies. In addition to improving salaries and working conditions and balancing ratios, workforce development should also look into elements such as the training and re-training of staff, including training about the use of technology, but also providing space for professionals to discuss their perspectives and challenges, both with management and amongst their peers.

There are many benefits in investing more in social care and support and not only in terms of the impact of the service provision itself. With most disability care and support providers in Europe being not-for-profit and an estimated

80% of service expenditure going towards the workforce, investment into social care and support means direct re-investment into creating local jobs and keeping investment in the communities where these workers live.

Other initiatives, such as the new workforce management models implemented by Buurtzorg can also play a role. Developing strong Social Dialogue structures, where employers and trade unions can come together and negotiate common solutions and sectoral standards, will also help to bring solutions to the staff shortages. [Particular effort must be placed to develop such structures in countries where they do not exist or are weak, especially in southern, central and eastern Europe](#). And this must start with the European Union leading by example and [creating a European sectoral social dialogue committee in social services](#) to formalise structures for the Federation of European Social Employers and the European Federation of Public Service Unions to discuss and negotiate together at EU level.



Work in Social and Support Needs Leadership by All

Social care and support is going through a paradigm shift, moving away from institutional and segregating forms of services towards more community-based and person-centred services which can better respond to the individual needs and wishes of users. This is of course a difficult process, radically transforming how organisations have previously functioned and the day-to-day work of staff.

Leadership in social care and support services is therefore a must.

The first step in leadership is to have a vision, a vision about how to transform the services

you provide to ensure they provide the best possible environment to help persons with support needs to access their rights; be it -for instance- to live independently and in the community or to get a job in the open labour market or a place in mainstream education.

As important as the vision is in itself, the most important element of leadership is to know the best, most effective and quickest way to get there. It's about ensuring the right steps are taken to make this transformation a reality, whilst keeping as many people on board as possible. It's about not taking "no" for an answer, but instead as an opportunity to find solutions to turn the "no" into a feasible "yes". It is also about understanding the barriers and adapting to the changing context if needed. Managers need to do all this whilst not losing sight of the goal and focus of ensuring that the services they lead have a positive impact on the quality of life of service users and enable them to access their human rights.

It is the *raison d'être* of management to show leadership. It should perhaps also be the *raison d'être* of all staff to become enablers of change and show leadership towards ensuring the human rights enjoyment of service users.

Working in Care and Support is not like any other job. Providers and their staff serve the purpose of helping to create the conditions that enables everyone to function as a full member of society and to advance their human and fundamental rights.



As such, working in social care and support is also about values, about fighting for a more inclusive society and about fighting for the rights of service users. This being said, it is important to re-affirm that fighting for the rights of persons is not the same as simply claiming to speak on their behalf. Staff in social care and support must be fully aware of their over-riding responsibility to enable persons with disabilities to have their voices and opinions heard and respected. Staff in social care and support -at all levels- do know what opportunities there are and how they may best put in practice on a day to day basis the

choices and wishes of service users, within the constraints they have to operate under. This unique voice of social care and support staff has an important role to play in any discussion on the future of social care and support and how to improve their ability to give choice and control to persons with support needs over their lives.

Concluding Recommendations

To conclude, the purpose of social services is to help create the conditions that enables everyone to function as a full member of society and to advance their human and fundamental rights as active citizens

The single most important element in social service provision is staff, as there is no social care and support without the qualified professionals who help to create the right enabling conditions for persons with support needs to live full and active lives. In short, staff matters!

Social care and support can bring many opportunities to people wanting to work in the sector. There are also some considerable

challenges, chief among them increasing staff shortages and difficulties in attracting people to work in this field.

Yet, if Europe is to ensure access to UN CRPD-compliant care and support services, we have to attract more people and provide quality professional development opportunities and career paths to all. As a result of the Conference "Staff Matters! Disability Workforce of Tomorrow", EASPD recommends policy-makers, service providers and user organisations to focus on five action points as key drivers for ensuring that Europe has a human rights enabling workforce that helps to meet the growing need for social care and support in the years to come.

1. Maximise the attractiveness of the sector

Work in social care is important and meaningful. We must work towards attracting the increasing number of people who are seeking more meaning in their professional life, by offering decent wages, working conditions and better career paths.

2. Focus on supporting people

Work in social care and support is done by people for people. We must ensure that we reduce administrative burdens and maximise face-to-face contact between social care and support staff and service users and other beneficiaries. Equally important is to ensure that we provide more autonomy to front-line workers and allow them to take decisions as close as possible to the needs and wishes of service users. Innovative methodologies – such as new organizational procedures, co-production and technology can play an important role here.

3. Embrace diversity in the workforce

Work in social care and support is about local communities and welcomes very diverse skills, profiles & perspectives. We need to work on ensure that Social Care and Support provision is attractive to people with different backgrounds. Social Care and Support needs to maximise the talent it attracts and must therefore work on recruiting and retaining a more pluralistic workforce, in terms of skills, qualifications, gender and background. Particular effort must also be made to provide equal opportunities for career progression between men and women.

4. Invest more in workforce development

Work in social care and support requires resources and investment. The underinvestment of the past decade has created staff shortages in most if not all countries. This must be reversed. Public authorities must also ensure that workforce development is at the heart of their funding models and social investment strategies in the years to come. Social Dialogue can also play an important role in creating a happy and qualified workforce and should be promoted.

5. Create opportunities for leadership

Work in social care and support needs leadership. We need to create an environment where both management and staff in social care and support become leaders in the promotion and transition to community-based care and support services. We need to ensure that all professionals in social care and support have confidence in the necessary changes required in social service provision to be in line with the UN CRPD, are sufficiently trained to understand its meaning and themselves become enablers of change for the lives of millions of persons with disabilities and society as a whole in the years to come. Leadership -at all levels- is necessary to make this become a reality.

EASPD is the **European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities**. We are a European not-for-profit organisation representing over 17,000 social services and disability organisations across Europe. The main objective of EASPD is to promote equal opportunities for people with disabilities through effective and high-quality service systems.

