

BEST Quality: Benchmarking – European – Standards in social services - Transnationally**1. A short description of the action**

A concise description of the context in which the action was carried out, the target group(s) of the action as well as the key activities and deliverables

The quality management systems used by providers of social services were compared and evaluated within the framework of the BEST Quality project for the first time. The Europe-wide comparison was practice-oriented; it was intended to clarify the efficiency of the individual systems as regards to quality development.

In Europe there is a range of different QM systems. Some social service providers relinquish QM procedures due to insecurity as regards to the question which model could help them. Up to date, there was no concrete system comparison taking into consideration the guidelines of the European Union. The providers of the social sector often argue that their services could not be compared to each other. National thinking at the cost of European thinking. Comparing measurements both on economic level (e.g. focus on the outcome, continuous improvement) and as regards to the specifics (e.g. comprehensiveness, ethics, customer focus) were regarded as being hardly possible.

Seven partners from four countries compared and evaluated the most popular QM systems (EFQM, E-Qalin, EQUASS, Investors in People, ISO). With the help of a matrix developed within the framework of the project they analysed the particular requirements for social service providers and compared these to the specifications of the European Commission. By means of the practice-oriented reference levels in the fields of assistance to people with a disability and elderly people, the needs of the target groups human beings in old age and/or with a disability could be incorporated.

Under the motto "Creating common rules and maintaining the diversity in doing so" the results of the project were published within the study on QM systems for social services. Social service providers, service users, cooperation partners, benefactors, and politicians are provided with a differentiated and internationally coordinated description of the term quality for the first time. The European Commission is provided with recommendations as regards to which QM system ensures a standard specified by the same beforehand.

2. Main objectives of the action

The objective of the project is a pan-European comparison of understandings of quality within the social services sector with the focus being on assistance to people with a disability and elderly people. The project is intended to provide the European Commission and its advisory councils (e.g. the Disability High Level Group and the Social Protection Committee) with a how-to guide and inspiration as to how the quality of social service providers can be compared, assessed, and improved on a pan-European scale.

The practice-oriented comparison is intended to provide a contribution to improving service standards, comparing the same to the ratified results of the Consultation Committee, identifying possibly required modifications, and providing suggestions for the further concrete development and implementation of a common European understanding and framework of quality. Therefore, the project takes the common regulations in the field of social services of general interest as a reference, within the framework of which the European strategy has been analysed by the Commission and recommendations as regards to a *Common Quality Framework (CQF)* were generated, adopted by the Consultation Committee in November 2008 within the Social Protection Committee (SPC).

3. Key results

a. results/outcomes of the action, including benefits for main actors and target group(s)

The developed cross reference matrix is intended to facilitate the search for a system appropriate for the corresponding organisation for social service providers. By means of the cross reference matrix, the user of quality systems can see which quality systems a CQF SSGI-oriented specific quality strategy can be derived from (within the meaning of a “modular system”).

The open cross matrix is particularly interesting as an instrument for self-evaluation as well as for benchmarking and benchlearning. Providers of social services are able to check whether and how they put the required quality criteria in their facilities into practice. This results in a continuous improvement of the social services in Europe and of the quality of life of human beings with a disability.

The developed recommendations for actions form a pan-European orientation level for quality management systems and their processes that can be illustrated within the matrix. The matrix structure considers ethic and social aspects, as well as economic necessities and statutory provisions. Quality assurance and quality improvement for services of general interest will be achieved by duty-bound compliance with the boundary conditions, at which the universality continuously allows for adaptations to national contexts and particularities within the framework and continuously keeps open paths to innovative and creative further developments.

The study “Creating common rules and maintaining the diversity in doing so” comprehensively explains the results of the project and indicates important improvement potentials furthermore.

b. added value of the action, i.e. the lasting impact and/or multiplier effect.

As a variable decisive for competition, quality will be increasingly important in the social sector as well. In order to be able to measure, analyse, and assess quality from a European perspective, valid instruments are required. Such an instrument was developed with this matrix within the framework of the BEST Quality project.

The “European quality indicators” provide the providers and users of social services with transparency and comparability. This way, the implementation of the defined QM requirements in the social sector is facilitated. This will result in the improvement of the quality of social services on a pan-European scale.

The advanced training courses planned for 2011 are intended to provide a contribution to demonstrating the range of usage and application options of the matrix to social service providers in the field of assistance to people with a disability and elderly people. Furthermore, the courses are intended to initiate practical starting points. The aforementioned will result in pan-European benchmarking activities.

Within the framework of the study, it becomes clear in which direction the fields of assistance to elderly people and people with a disability should develop in Europe. In this, the focus of all process-efficient activities is on the human being. The recommendations for actions in the field of sustainable quality assurance and improvement as regards to social services are intended to support the citizens threatened with exclusion in developing a self-determined plan of life and implementing this plan in a participation-oriented manner as regards to the life within the community. The project partnership does not only enforce the rights, but furthermore supports the design of the European community on the basis of the aforementioned.