

Consultation on Social Services of General Interest – position of Local Government Denmark

Local Government Denmark represents all 98 local authorities in Denmark. Local authorities are responsible for more than 50 per cent of the total public expenditure in Denmark. After a structural reform, which will come into force by January 2007, local authorities will undertake the major part of the citizen-related services such as care of the elderly, employment, health and child care, special education, primary school, nature, environment, and planning.

In general, Local Government Denmark believes that it is important to recognise the central role of local and regional authorities in defining, organising, financing and monitoring services of general interest and thus also social services of general interest.

Local authorities, which are closest to the citizens concerned, are best placed to judge the type, method and quality of Services of General Interest.

It is very important that local authorities are free to decide whether to provide the service itself, in conjunction with other authorities or to choose other solutions, including private-sector options. The subsidiarity principle – both horizontal and vertical - should be recognised fully such that local authorities as a matter of principle are free to decide how to provide such services. It is thus important that local authorities retain flexibility as regards different commissioning and delivery models for social services. An important aspect in local communities and the reform which has taken place in Denmark is the local involvement of citizens in the decisions taking place in different areas.

Local Government Denmark cannot see that (COM(2006) 177 final) gives reason to the question forwarded.

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Field 1 Description of social services

Local Government Denmark believes that the definition of social services is too narrow. Social Services of General Interest in Denmark cover areas that are broader than the definition suggested by the Commission. E.g. some Social Services of General Interest are delivered by some service providers on a profit basis. In Denmark, this also applies to the care for elderly. In this case, local authorities assign a service based on an individual agreement with the user. The user is thus able to select the care provider that they think offers the best care. This service often covers several legal areas. The reason for deciding to make use of private providers is a believe that it will improve competition, quality and free choice.

This example also shows that it is difficult to differentiate between Social Services of General Interest and Services of General Economic Interest. Further, often but not always social services are targeted at socially weak groups E.g. child care and social housing are services that are targeted at all groups of society. This makes it difficult to define criteria and characteristics that distinguish social services of general from other services of general interest.

Field 2 – pertinence of the characteristics

The social services sector in Europe is undergoing rapid changes and modernisation. Local Government Denmark believes that this development combined with the request for higher quality, individual demands, choice of freedom between different service providers cannot be encompassed within the narrow definition listed in the Communication by the Commission.

In terms of quality, there is an increased focus on how to further develop quality in a period with economic constraints and where users increase in number. Additionally, improving documentation and quality measurements are central elements in this development. Local Government Denmark believes that an EU framework may restrict this process of further developing quality.

Field 3 – Use of characteristics by Member State

Local Government Denmark does not believe that it possible nor desirable to have one common definition of what are services of general interest since there are great variation between Member States. Also, it is important to underline that Member States must be able to continue to take full responsibility for policies in the fields of social services. Member States organise their social services according to national and local needs and priorities.

Field 7 – Future steps at Community level

Local Government Denmark believes that the open method of coordination is the best instrument for countries to exchange experiences on ways to organise social services of general interest. We are not in favour of a framework for social services of general interest because we do not believe that it is neither necessary nor sensible for the EU to find a common definition on social services of general interest. A framework directive would hamper the undergoing modernisation and changes in each of the Member States and would not be able to take these specific developments into consideration.