An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Eacnamaíoch agus Shóisialta

National Economic & Social Council

NESC

Quality and Standards
in Human Services in Ireland:
Executive Summary

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The Council has had a concern with quality, standards and accountability in human services for some time. NESC has referenced citizens' rights, standards and benchmarks, and the importance of human services which are tailored to meet individuals' requirements in various reports. Allied to NESC's concerns is the existence of public anxiety about the failure of regulation and standards in both financial and human service systems, along with a demand for higher standards and better service provision. The economic crisis places the challenges of public sector reform and provision of quality human services in even sharper focus.

This overall project is concerned with how regulation and standards can best contribute to good quality, continuously improving human services. The report provides a review of approaches to regulation, standards-setting and continuous improvement: from a conceptual viewpoint, from international experience and from recent experience in Ireland. This report is the first in a series of reports. Subsequent reports review the role of standards and quality improvement initiatives in a number of human service areas, specifically: eldercare, end-of-life care, disability, schools, and policing. A synthesis report will draw together the conclusions from all of the reports.

A number of key issues and ideas have emerged from this initial overview of concepts and practice. They are briefly outlined below.

A key insight is that effective regulation is much more than rules and compliance. Both effective regulation and standards focus on performance and outcomes, and adopting a collaborative problem-solving approach. The evidence suggests the need to build on strengths as well as focusing on problems, while reserving sanctions for non-compliance. Thinking on regulation has moved beyond traditional 'command and control' and self-regulatory approaches towards 'responsive regulation'. Responsive regulation has been conceptualised as a pyramid, with self-regulation and voluntary approaches at the bottom, and sanctions at the apex. The middle of the pyramid includes meta-regulation which is the 'regulation of self regulation'. Even though this responsive regulation approach has been very influential world-wide we have found it limiting in its application to the human services we have reviewed. Rather than a relatively straightforward relationship between the regulator and the regulated, we are finding multiple routes to standards-setting and quality, involving a wide range of bodies concerned with quality, who are both formally and informally connected in a number of different ways.

We have also found that both in the provision of services and in their regulation there is an increasing drive to focus on the needs of service users, reflected in

references to a move towards person-centred and tailored services. There is a greater emphasis on taking into account the needs and voice of service users, with greater levels of consultation and user involvement. This is based on a rationale of the importance of getting a range of perspectives, especially from the actual users of services on their experience of accessing and receiving the service. This trend towards more tailored services has implications for the way services are to be delivered. Budgets have to be allocated and monitored differently, the practice of service delivery is different, and thus the context for regulation, accountability and quality improvement is also different.

The evidence reviewed in the report suggests that a fruitful approach to quality improvement is to set a small number of guiding principles 'at the centre' and devolve their application to the local context. This approach requires the centre to have a support role as well as continuing to have an oversight role to ensure compliance, while local providers have the opportunity and flexibility to improve quality and performance. The overriding priority is to achieve and improve outcomes for service users, and to document and shape these experiences. In the current economic context this is proving challenging where there can be a conflict between delegating authority and the desire to control resources more directly from the centre. Yet, the evidence would suggest that supporting the people who deliver the service directly to the public results in more creativity and innovation, and ultimately a better quality service, with some sort of oversight body to deal with those who might be recalcitrant.

A recurring theme in the current economic climate is how to improve quality in service provision while at the same time cutting costs. The limited evidence which exists suggests that approaches which have been found to be effective include the benefits of focusing on the service user, the importance of work processes and systems, the centrality of measurement, recognising and rewarding those who work in the frontline, working across organisational boundaries to minimise both gaps and duplication, the identification and reduction of waste, and holding managers to account. In the context of limited resources meta-regulation offers a viable approach.

A key message from all the evidence reviewed is the need for a system in which standards and the means of achieving them are continuously monitored and revised through comparison of the work of similarly situated organisations. While there is a greater focus on outcomes, further consideration remains to be given to what outcomes are being sought and how they will be measured. A particular challenge is to interrogate the reasons why a service is provided in a specific way, especially if that service deviates from agreed standards or norms. By making these reasons explicit, weaknesses or gaps in service provision can be identified and addressed, especially where service provision cuts across organisational boundaries. Ideally, learning should take place at a number of levels: the level at which the service is delivered; at regional or sectoral level; and at the level of the regulator or at national level. Data are required to inform the learning, but these data have to be useful for both the service provider at the frontline as well as to the centre and oversight body.

The report concludes with three emerging ideas. First, that there are multiple routes to quality. These multiple routes can accommodate diversity by adapting general goals to local contexts, but with the requirement for co-ordinated learning and improvement from local experimentation. Second, there is a need to connect the wide range of bodies concerned with standards. One way of doing this would be through the development of a quality improvement framework. Third, that quality can be raised through ongoing incremental improvements. The development of a quality improvement framework could facilitate this approach with fora of relevant stakeholders sharing problems and solutions across different policy fields. These ideas will be examined in relation to specific sectors of human services in subsequent reports.