



An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Eacnamaíoch agus Shóisialta
National Economic & Social Council

Achieving Quality in Ireland's Human Services - A Synthesis Report

Executive Summary

This study summarises the findings in the NESC series of reports *Quality and Standards in Human Services in Ireland*. A principal hypothesis underlying these reports has been that a ‘silent revolution’ has occurred in Ireland regarding the regulatory infrastructure over certain human services. Over the last decade and more, there has been dramatic change in the oversight of some services, underpinned by standards, that has gone largely unremarked. In relation to residential care for older people, for example, the establishment of the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) as an independent regulator of residential centres has had a significant effect on the quality of care within these places. How regulation is conducted can have a crucial bearing on the quality of a human service like education or disability services. NESC believes that examining these and other areas could offer vital insights into how far Ireland has travelled in terms of securing high-quality services and gauging what still has to be accomplished. It is for this reason that NESC undertook a review of the international research and policy on achieving quality through standards as well as completing sectoral reports on how standards were being achieved and quality attained in the following areas: (1) policing; (2) schools; (3) disability services; (4) residential care for older people; (5) home care for older people; (6) end-of-life care. Different approaches to fostering improvements have been adopted in each of these areas and the rationale for this synthesis report is to compare and contrast the different areas and see if any common themes emerge that could help to cultivate quality in other human services.

A legitimate question to ask is why should we be concerned with the quality of human service provision at a time of economic austerity and financial cutbacks. It can be argued, however, that quality should be inherent in how we provide human services and it is thus of concern more than ever, as we need to ensure optimal use of scarce resources. As well as the idea that quality should be intrinsic in the provision of human services, people are now more aware of their rights and the obligations due to them by service providers, and are more prepared to challenge inadequate services. Irish society is also more diverse and there is an expectation that services should be more tailored to meet people’s needs. This has the potential added benefit of making services more efficient, with less waste.

As argued in all of NESC’s recent work, there is an important complementarity between economic and social development. Therefore, at a time when we need to promote economic growth, we also need the support of quality social systems. An added dimension is the importance of public trust in Ireland’s institutions and their capacity to deliver quality services. In many areas that trust has been lost as a result of gross systems failures in some services and settings. There is a need to repair that deficit and, thus, a wide-ranging assessment of the systems of quality, standards and accountability in human services can be seen as addressing the critical issue of trust in Ireland’s public authorities.

In examining these matters, the report is structured as follows. Chapter 1 sets out why NESC has a concern for the provision of quality human services, as described in the preceding paragraphs. Chapter 2 summarises some of the insights of the first NESC report in this area, *Quality and Standards in Human Services in Ireland: Overview of Concepts and Practices*. It argues for a broad notion of regulation, encompassing non-State as well as State actors and using a variety of different instruments — from legal sanction to moral pressure and peer review — to help produce quality, tailored outcomes. These instruments are most likely to promote quality when they are accompanied by review and revision of practice by those who deliver human services. In effect, practitioners are encouraged to ‘work out a better way to work’. Ideally, this kind of review should be guided by the question of whether standards or guiding norms are being fulfilled: for example, are service users being adequately consulted in the delivery of services? This can help make the assumptions behind service delivery more transparent as well as making it easier to compare different ways that people deliver services.

Chapter 3 summarises the contents of the NESC sectoral reports. It applies their insights to assess the nature and efficacy of the various regulatory regimes as to what extent they deliver quality in the following sectors: policing, schooling, disability, residential and home care for older people, and end-of-life care. Each of these sectoral reports exemplifies a different approach to delivering a quality service, what this report terms ‘multiple routes to quality’.

Chapter 4 builds on this analysis to suggest some positive courses of action that would be conducive to further improvement and reform in each of the sectors. Many of these individual recommendations have a common basis in a possible development that is termed a ‘centre supportive of continuous improvement’. This refers to the idea that the ‘policy centre’ which might comprise of a regulator and government department or agency, should be concerned not just with whether individual organisations are abiding by standards but how they can be supported in this endeavour, and how the entire sector can be continuously improved. Being supportive does not mean that the policy centre has succumbed to ‘regulatory capture’: it is primarily supportive of standards because of the beneficial effects that they can have on services. Because it is supportive in this way, it means that the policy centre might need to need to be deeply provocative in relation to current practice if it does not abide by the best current understanding of how to exemplify standards.

Chapter 5 concludes the report by enquiring about the implications of this notion of a ‘supportive centre’ for Ireland’s current strategies of public sector reform. The chapter suggests that the two concerns of a policy centre, improving the performance of individual organisations and assessing the efficacy of the overall field of practice, puts a premium on what the OECD (2008) has called a performance dialogue. Often it will be government departments that will have to institute this dialogue. They will need to maintain the balance of being supportive whilst also being willing to be provocative if services are not delivering standards and quality. This may involve prompting general improvements by providing services through alternative institutional mechanisms, such as social enterprises, which might have a greater capacity to deliver higher-quality services. Ireland already has a hybrid welfare system combining public, private and voluntary elements. What this study

has found is that it is the organisational capability and disciplines of quality that lead to a continually improving regime of quality service provision, regardless of the institutional origins of the service providers. The challenge is to provide an environment conducive for quality service providers to flourish, to share the benefits of that experience, and so bring about wider systemic improvements in the provision of quality services.

