



2ND EASPD SNAPSHOT REPORT

**THE IMPACT
OF COVID-19 ON
DISABILITY SERVICES
IN EUROPE**

OCTOBER 2020

This is a report by the European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD).

Authors:

Thomas Bignal, EASPD Policy Manager

Layout: Ilaria Cassani, Communication Officer



EASPD wishes to thank all those who contributed to the development of this report.

Brussels, October 2020

Copyright © EASPD 2020

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system without the prior permission of the copyright.

This publication has been produced with the financial support of the European Union Programme for Employment and Social Innovation "EaSI" (2014-2020). The information contained in this publication does not necessarily reflect the official position of the European Commission.



CONTENTS

Main Messages.....	3
1.Introduction.....	5
2.General Impact on type of care and support services provided to persons with disabilities	6
3.Service Continuity is at risk.....	7
4.Health and Safety vs Choice and Control.....	10
5.What role for the European Union?.....	13
6.Conclusions.....	16

EASPD SNAPSHOT REPORT

MAIN MESSAGES

This report follows EASPD's first Snapshot report on the impact of Covid-19 on Disability Services in Europe (April 2020) and aims to provide a Europe-wide overview on the state of play of the situation in October 2020. It is based on data collected by the European Association of Service providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD) in October 2020.

The main messages from the report include:

- There has been huge progress in the provision of care and support for persons with disabilities since the first wave and lockdown, with most services now being provided again; including in face-to-face formats.
- This is in part due to the flexibility showed by many service providers to adapt how the support and care are provided, both through digital means and ways which maximise physical distancing. Personal protective equipment is now largely available across the continent.
- Regarding the ongoing second wave, the situation remains unstable. This is due to several challenges which put at risk the continuity and sustainability of service provision in Europe; including:
 - Inadequate public support to guarantee the financial sustainability of the sector due to increased costs, diminished income and the pre-existing difficulties experienced by many service providers across the continent.
 - Accentuated staff shortages due to increased absenteeism, staff departures, sick leave and mental health difficulties.
- There is evidence that the emphasis on 'protecting persons with disabilities' is in fact leading to less choice and control over their lives – and human rights enjoyment – for many persons with disabilities, including over the services they use. This is against the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, as ratified by the European Union.
- What is required instead is that services for persons with disabilities continue to function, that they continue to provide choice and control to persons with disabilities

over their lives and this is done in a way which protects the health and safety of both the service beneficiaries and the professionals involved.

- This requires the following steps which the Public Authorities should ensure is in place:
 - Adequate funding for service providers to cover additional costs and compensate for losses in view of guaranteeing the financial sustainability and jobs of the service providers.
 - Support service providers in recruiting and retaining staff to guarantee continuity of service provision; also support service providers in training beneficiaries and professionals on health and safety in times of Covid-19.
 - Prioritise access to personal protective equipment, test and trace systems and vaccines (when developed) for both social service beneficiaries and professionals.
 - Support service providers in digitalising their services through guidance, funding for buying equipment and training of stakeholders and creating accessible digital tools and solutions.
- The impact of the European Union's support for disability services during Covid-19 pandemic remains limited for now; primarily, but not only, due to choices made at national level. Although this can in part be explained by the distribution of competences, the European Union should do more to guarantee the continuity and sustainability of a sector which is essential to its social policies and to respect its human rights obligations. This includes adaptations to EU fiscal rules, state aid and public procurement policies, facilitating the use of EU funds immediately and ensuring that its social policy plans for 2021 tackle many of the issues affecting social services during this Covid-19 pandemic.

1. Introduction

This report follows EASPD's first Snapshot report on impact of COVID-19 on Disability Services in Europe (April 2020) and aims to provide a Europe-wide overview on the state of play of the situation in October 2020. The report relies on data collected by EASPD's Member Forums, which are made up of EASPD's members, representing over 17.000 services across 34 European countries. The following report aims to provide an overarching assessment of the situation in Europe, although of course it does not and cannot fully reflect the varying circumstances and complex diversity in each European Member State. The aim of this report is primarily to inform European policy makers of the state of play of the provision of care and support for persons with disabilities across the continent. Many of the opportunities and challenges referred to below cover all the forms of services to persons with disabilities provided by our membership: work and employment, day to day care and support, emergency support, education and training, childcare, cultural participation, etc.



2. General Impact on type of care and support services provided to persons with disabilities

Disability services are running

In contrast to the first half of the year, it appears as if most forms of residential care, homecare, day care, respite care, work integration enterprises and other services have tended to re-open. This is of course to the benefit of the millions of people who use such services to enjoy their human rights, live in dignity and access work and employment opportunities. Equally important to acknowledge is the commitment and flexibility shown by the sector's staff to ensuring that such services are provided during what is a global pandemic; often and before public support was actually brought to the attention of the service providers.

New ways of support and flexible organisations

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought many new ways of delivering support; in part by accelerating the digitalisation of the sector. One of the biggest advantages of this rapid transition is the improved dialogue between formal and informal carers, although of course the quality of the care and support is (generally) not the same as in face-to-face support. The rapid shift online also shows the versatility and adaptability of the sector in finding new solutions to evolving social

and, in this instance, public health challenges. Another example of this versatility is how quickly social economy enterprises – including those working with persons with disabilities – shifted their production processes to support the ongoing public health needs; such as the development of masks in Belgium or laundry services for hospitals in Spain.

Continuity of service delivery at risk

It is important to note however that the provision of care and support is done within a variety of contexts and limitations, such as the new health and safety rules, the continuation of online support and the structural challenges affecting the sector (further discussed later in the paper). Despite the improvement of the situation since April 2020, it is important to note that the continuity of disability care and support services – an absolutely crucial factor for millions of persons with disabilities – is at risk. Significant efforts are needed to both help the service providers recover from the crisis but also help build up their resilience to such crises.

The following sections will help to give a clearer overview on the main challenges affecting disability services in October 2020.

3. Service Continuity is at risk

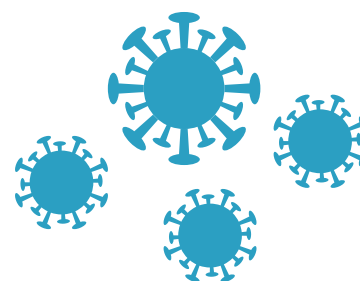
Disability services are essential services

Service continuity in the field of disability is absolutely crucial. This is due to the essential nature and contribution of many care and support services in the lives of those who use such services, as well as their family members. Without care and support services, many persons with disabilities would not be able to enjoy their basic human and social rights like others, participate in society and be in employment. As such, the continuous provision of such services is essential; which explains in part the responsibility of the State in enabling the sector to provide their services.

Staff shortages and challenges

The social care and support workers are the single most important facet of disability service provision. Even in pre-Covid times, there were significant staff shortages in the sector; in particular for qualified staff. The Covid-19 pandemic has only exacerbated these issues. Additional problems such as increased absenteeism, sick leave, mental health issues and staff departures re-enforce the existing shortages. Special attention should look into how the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted the attractiveness of the sector's professions, which could be seen as either 'meaningful, thus

attractive' or as 'dangerous, thus unattractive' on top of the other ideas about working in the social field (poor wages, difficult working conditions, gender stereotypes, etc.). An indirect consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic is the increased support to the mainstream healthcare sector, including in terms of improved wages and working conditions. To date, public support to the social care sector has generally been more limited; which will only re-enforce staff shortages given that many of the more medically-oriented staff in social care will move to the better paid jobs in healthcare. Without urgent steps taken by policy makers at all levels, the continuity of care and support for persons with support needs will be in doubt as there will not be sufficient workers willing and able to provide such services. In many countries, especially given the compulsory staff ratios and qualification rules, staff shortages are no longer just a theoretical challenge but an existential one.



Inadequate support for financial sustainability

The continuity of care and support services also relies on adequate funding frameworks by public authorities. In many if not all EU countries, disability services are underfunded; which partly explains the staff shortages referred to above. This is a well recognised structural issue with many service providers actively working in 'survival mode' after years of austerity. The adequacy of funding is not just about ensuring that the basic social welfare systems continue to exist; but that the coverage of the social welfare systems continue to improve. In some cases, even the former is in doubt. In such a context, it is not surprising that many social service providers are struggling financially since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The pandemic has meant that service providers have had to increase their expenditure, to ensure that the care and support can be provided safely for all involved. This means expenditure in the fields of personal protective equipment (masks, etc.), testing, additional staff and working hours, buying new technologies, adapting service infrastructure and much more. Furthermore, there is a very wide degree of experiences across Europe as to who has the responsibility to pay for this

expenditure given that they were not included in the pre-existing contractual agreement. Some Public Authorities have accepted to cover the additional costs of their service providers as is the case in the Salzburg region of Austria. However, many other have not yet acknowledged that; leading to significant financial issues for many of the providers who were already in 'survival mode' and have had to make significant expenditure in order to ensure the safe continuity of the service provided.



This increased expenditure of providers should also be read in the context of decreased incomes for many with many Public Authorities considering their contracts with service providers as unfulfilled, the fact that less new contracts are made available, and the decreased own-funding (fundraising, social enterprises, etc.). Despite the adaptations that have been made by the providers to deliver the care and support in line with the public health limitations. There are many instances where public authorities considered the contracts with the providers to be unfulfilled and therefore unpaid. This clearly puts the financial sustainability of many service providers at risk, with a consequent impact on the continuity of the services provided.

Survival mode at risk

The impact of the crisis on public budgets in the months and years to come could significantly damage the funding of social services; many of whom have not yet recovered from the last economic crisis of 2008 ('survival mode'). The use of the flexibility clause to the EU's fiscal rules have brought some short-term relief; but there are significant concerns about what will happen when the flexibility clause will be restricted again and the impact on an already financially-struggling sector.



4. Health and Safety vs Choice and Control

Disability services are running

The fact that many care and support services for persons with disabilities are up and running again – within certain restrictions - is the single most important positive development over the last few months in the field. Throughout the continent, many persons with disabilities now have access again to the services they need to enjoy their basic human and social rights, in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights.

A step back in choice and control for service beneficiaries

It is impossible however to ignore that many service users have taken a step back and have suffered significantly from the lack of (face-to-face) professional care and support provided during the crisis, the isolation many endured and how this affected their ability to participate in society and live in dignity. It is therefore essential to focus on avoiding another lockdown in the field of care and support and to find the right balance between services empowering those who use the services and the need to ensure this is done in a safe way for both the user and support provider. Too often, members have highlighted that the balance to this approach has focused primarily on the safety of the service user, rather than in helping them enjoy their human rights. For instance, there has been many cases

where the user of services is no longer or less in control over how the services are provided, in comparison to before the crisis. For instance, it is very often the legal guardians and the service providers who have authority over the functioning of the service rather than the person using the service. This for instance has been the case in some work integration services, where decisions have been taken without the input of the workers.

Danger of re-medicalisation

Another response has been the tendency to further medicalise the provision of care and support over the individual needs and wishes of the service users. It is important to take the necessary steps to avoid that Covid-19 leads to a reduction of human rights enjoyment and that the progress made towards the de-institutionalisation of social services is not weakened by the onset of the public health crisis. The risk is very high, with many confusing the right to healthcare for service users with the provision of healthcare within social care settings. The direction should instead ensure that social support systems help to empower persons with support needs to enjoy their rights, albeit in health and safe conditions, and to ensure that persons with support needs have access to mainstream healthcare services.

A starting point for this discussion is to ensure that the provision of social support can be provided in healthy and safe conditions.

Supply of personal protective equipment

Personal protective equipment (masks, etc.) need to be made available and, on the whole, such equipment appears to be available in most countries. Although there are very strong concerns and difficulties over who pays for these additional costs (see prior point on continuity). With the second wave well on its way across many European Member States, public authorities must continue to take pro-active steps to ensure that PPE continues to be made available for disability services and those who use the services across the continent.

Prioritisation of test, trace and vaccines (when developed)

Test and tracing in services for persons with disabilities is a mixed picture and a further prioritisation of the sector within the systems in place are an absolute must to manage and restrict the spread of the virus across such services and the people most at risk who use such services. With the development of vaccines appearing to be ready within a question of weeks and months, it is essential that both the staff in care and support services and those benefitting from them are prioritised in the vaccination; on an equal basis to

those in services for the elderly and the national health services systems.

Training of Staff and Beneficiaries on Health and Safety

Health and safety also requires the adequate training for staff and service users alike. Appropriate training still appears to be rather weak or not specifically targeting the reality of the services at stake where close connection with service beneficiaries can be a necessity. The training programmes for service users also need to be made accessible, including in easy-to-read formats, for the service beneficiaries. The Covid-19 pandemic continues to bring much uncertainty to the situation and mental health support should be made available for workers and service beneficiaries.

How to make the best of digitalisation during Covid-19

The use of digital tools can also help to reduce face-to-face contact and provide the support that is needed. Many challenges, however, remain; starting with the unequal availability of stable internet connections and infrastructure across Europe and even within each country. Even in case where this is not feasible, digital support also depends on the availability of digital equipment; both for the professional and for the service beneficiary.

This also requires that both the workers and professionals are able and know how to use such equipment. In short, the digitalisation of disability services has advanced rapidly in 2020; but the process is easier said than done and digital gaps are appearing across the variety of issues just referred to. Pro-active policies are needed to ensure that digital infrastructure and equipment is available across the continent and that everyone is trained in a way that can allow such support to be provided online. Indeed, the last six months have shown that providing support online is a very different task to providing support face-to-face.



5. What role for the European Union?

After a slow start, the European Union has played an increasingly important role in the continent's response to Covid-19; perhaps especially from the perspective of economic recovery. It is important to note that much of the policy competences around Covid-19 (health, social, etc) are primarily at national level, meaning that the EU has limited responsibilities over these policies. The following part will briefly assess the impact of these policies on disability services.

EU Fiscal rules: good now but what later?

The European Union was very quick to bring additional flexibility to its usually water-tight fiscal rules. This meant that Member States were able to spend more money (and increase their public debt) to help the response to the crisis. Feedback from membership was that this has been visible through the willingness of some national and regional authorities to further support the disability services sector, in part due to less strict financial rules. Strong concerns have been raised however as to when the EU fiscal flexibility will end and what impact this will have over the funding of disability services. In past crises, EU fiscal rules and support for austerity measures have had a very severe impact on the provision of such services. In fact, many support services were still recovering from the

2008 crisis at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.

EU State Aid: not being used to support disability services?

The EU also opened up its State Aid policies allowing Member States to provide financial aid to affected businesses. This step was welcomed by members. Many however highlighted that such measures did not directly affect them; either because they were targeting mostly larger companies or because their status as non-profit organisations means they are not considered as Small and Medium-sized Enterprises in the national law (despite the EU definition saying the contrary). Another argument made was that the EU should strongly encourage Member States to use State Aid measures to help organisations employ persons with disabilities; especially given the bleak economic forecast and how this will affect even more the employment of persons with disabilities.

EU Public Procurement: guidance to Member States?

Public procurement is also an important EU policy affecting social services and many public authorities showed little flexibility towards their contracts with national social service providers. This meant that the income of some providers was not – at least fully – met as the

services provided were not fully in line with the pre-Covid-19 contracts. It is important that the European Commission produces guidance to contracting authorities on adequately responding to the consequences of the crisis on some contracts. The European Commission should also promote the use of reserved markets to further support the not-for-profit sector and the employment of disadvantaged groups during the ongoing and upcoming economic crisis.

EU Funds: Support Centre needed!

The European Union developed the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative (CRII) to re-allocate existing EU funds to help Member States deal with the crisis.

No EASPD member has informed us that the CRII led to further support to disability services during this crisis, despite the increased costs (PPE, extra staff, digital equipment, etc.) One of the reasons for that is that Managing Authorities are not entirely well informed on how they can use these funds to support social services. The European Union is now negotiating its next EU budget and efforts should be made to ensure that the additional EU funds made available are adequately used to ensure the recovery and resilience of social service provision. This should start with setting up a 'Support Centre for the use of EU funds for social services', which has recently been proposed.



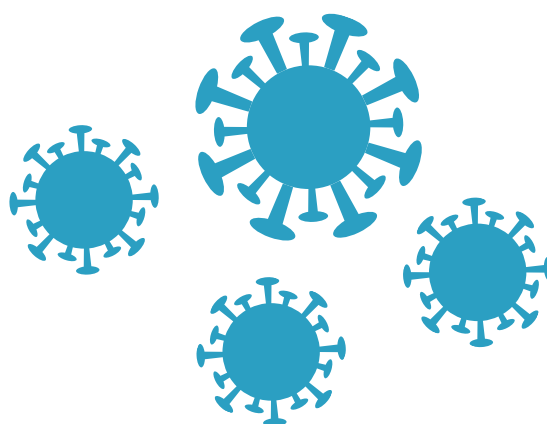
Recovery and Resilience Facility

Another significant opportunity for Public Authorities to support disability services is the EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility, a programme of €672.5 billion to support public investment into the economic recovery. It remains to be seen if this will be used to support the provision of support to persons with disabilities. The lack of earmarking for investment in the social field remains largely problematic and there are concerns that similar issues as for the CRII fund will apply again.

EU Social Policy Initiatives: a busy 2021, but any help for disability services?

The European Union is planning an ambitious 2021 for its social policy with plans to propose an Action Plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights, an Action Plan for the Social Economy, a European Disability Strategy, a Child Guarantee and much more. Disability Services play a very important role in each of these policy priorities and the current context of how Covid-19 affects them must be taken into account in the development of these proposals. As part of the Action Plan on the EPSR, and to counterbalance the lack of recognition towards the sector, the European Commission must strongly consider the European Parliament's call for a EU Framework for care services to minimum standards and quality guidelines, as well as to help the sector

recover from the crisis and fully benefit from the EU's Recovery Plan. EASPD is currently developing position papers on all of the topics, which are available on demand.



6. Conclusions

There has been huge progress in the provision of care and support for persons with disabilities since the first wave and lockdown, with most services now being provided again; including in face-to-face formats. This is very positive.

This is in part to the flexibility showed by many service providers to adapt how the support and care is provided, including through digital means as well as ways which maximise physical distancing. Personal protective equipment is now largely available across the continent.

Regarding the second wave, the situation remains unstable. This is due to several challenges which put at risk the continuity and sustainability of service provision in Europe; including:

- Inadequate public support to guarantee the financial sustainability of the sector due to increased costs, diminished income and the pre-existing difficulties experienced by many service providers across the continent.
- Accentuated staff shortages due to increased absenteeism, staff departures, sick leave and mental health difficulties.

There is evidence that the emphasis on 'protecting persons with disabilities' is in fact leading to less choice and control over their lives – and human rights enjoyment – for many persons with disabilities, including over the services they use. This against the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, as ratified by the European Union. What is required instead is that services for persons with disabilities continue to function, that they continue to provide choice and control to persons with disabilities over their lives and this is done in a way which protects the health and safety of both the service beneficiaries and the professionals involved. This requires the following steps which the Public Authorities should ensure is in place:

- Adequate funding for service providers to cover additional costs and compensate for losses in view of guaranteeing the financial sustainability and jobs of the service providers.
- Support service providers in recruiting and retaining staff to guarantee continuity of service provision; also support service providers in training beneficiaries and professionals on health and safety in times of Covid-19.
- Prioritise access to personal protective equipment, test and trace systems and vaccines (when developed) for both social service beneficiaries and professionals.

- Support service providers in digitalising their services through guidance, funding for buying equipment and training of stakeholders and creating accessible digital tools and solutions.
- The impact of the European Union's support for disability services during COVID19 pandemic remains limited for now; primarily, but not only, due to choices made at national level. Although this can in part be explained by the distribution of competences, the European Union should do more to guarantee the continuity and sustainability of a sector which is essential to its social policies and to respect its human rights obligations. This includes adaptations to EU fiscal rules, state aid and public procurement policies, facilitating use of EU funds immediately and ensuring that its social policy plans for 2021 tackle many of the issues affecting social services during this Covid-19 pandemic.

7. Supporting Documents

- [EASPD 1st Snapshot Report on Impact of COVID-19 on Disability Services in Europe](#) (April 2020).
- [Joint Position on Social Services and COVID-19: what role for EU?](#) (June 2020).
- [European Union: Coronavirus Response](#).
- [EASPD Publications with reports and studies on workforce, funding and much more](#).

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.



[.@easpdbrux](https://www.facebook.com/easpdbrux)



[@EASPD_BRUSSELS](https://twitter.com/EASPD_BRUSSELS)



www.easpd.eu